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by
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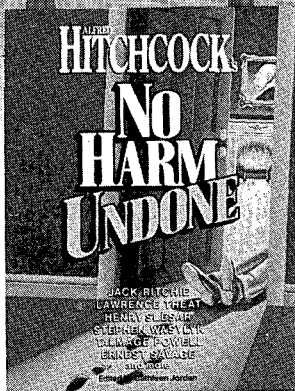
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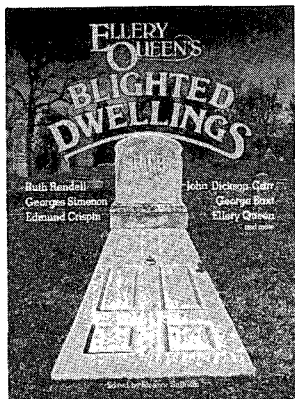
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CONTENTS



SHORT STORIES

NIGHT LIGHT by Al and Mary Kuhfeld	6
MY BROTHER'S LIFE by Rob Kantner	21
THE GHOST OF MONDAY by Andrew Klavan	51
DO BIRDS STILL SING WHEN THEY'RE OLD? by Quenda Behler Story	55
MAGIC NIGHTS by Jas. R. Petrin	70
BODY CHEMISTRY by George Ingersoll	88
LOVE AT SECOND SIGHT by Patricia Moyes	99
KELSO'S NIGHTMARE by Malcolm McClintick	105
THE PRICE OF TOMATOES by William Bunce	118

MYSTERY CLASSIC

STELLA CROZIER by Booth Tarkington	126
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DEPARTMENTS

EDITOR'S NOTES	2
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH	69
UNSOLVED by C. R. Wylie, Jr.	87
SOLUTION TO THE FEBRUARY "UNSOLVED"	148
BOOKED & PRINTED by Mary Cannon	149
MURDER BY DIRECTION by Peter Shaw	153
THE STORY THAT WON	155

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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

No; the Rob Kantner story in this issue—"My Brother's Life"—isn't a reprint from an earlier issue, though the title may look familiar. This is a second story about Ben Perkins' brother Bill; the one you may be thinking of was called "My Brother's Wife" and was published in AHMM in February 1985.

And speaking of Ben Perkins; we're glad to say that Kantner's first novel about his doings has just been published by Bantam Books as a paperback original. It's called *The Back-Door Man*, and it features several other characters from the series—Carole and her son Will, for instance, and especially Ben's Cincinnati lady friend, police officer Terry Lowe. We enjoyed it very much and are happy to report that there'll be yet another Perkins novel out from Bantam soon.

If "My Brother's Life" isn't a reprint, Patricia Moyes's "Love at Second Sight" is, but this distinguished mystery novelist's brief tale about some startling goings-on in an office and at a fairground is so charming that we wanted to bring it to you anyway. This is its first U.S.

publication; it was originally published in the London *Evening News* in 1961, and it's as fresh and delightful as it must have been a quarter of a century ago.

On the whole, this issue seemed to work itself out as our merry-go-round issue—or carnival issue, or something of the sort—between the Moyes story, much of the setting of Jas. R. Petrin's moving "Magic Nights," and the Mysterious Photograph. And as everyone knows, strange and wonderful and exciting things can happen when those particular lights go on—and sometimes frightening ones as well.

Not to mention frightening things well beyond a fairground's periphery. Two authors in this issue, for example, bring us stories that can only be described as macabre. Both are new to our pages: William Bunce, author of "The Price of Tomatoes," is Scottish-born, a teacher in New Jersey, and a chess aficionado; this is his third published story. Andrew Klavan, author of "The Ghost of Monday," is a professional writer of novels, stories, and nonfiction articles and is

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a news writer for a New York radio station. We recommend both to you; their tales will make you shiver.

Finally, notes from our managing editor, Lois Adams, regarding Bouchercon:

This year's Bouchercon, the annual mystery convention, was held on Columbus Day weekend in Baltimore. It's a very appropriate site for a mystery gathering, since Edgar Allan Poe's house is there; Poe fans slipped away from the convention as they could to tour the house and listen for the tell-tale . . . well, you'll just have to visit it yourself.

At the convention, panel discussions were animated. So were conversations in the halls, the hotel lobby, and the convention suites. Since this is sometimes the only chance mystery writers have to meet each other, or their fans, quite a few make the trip, including some familiar to

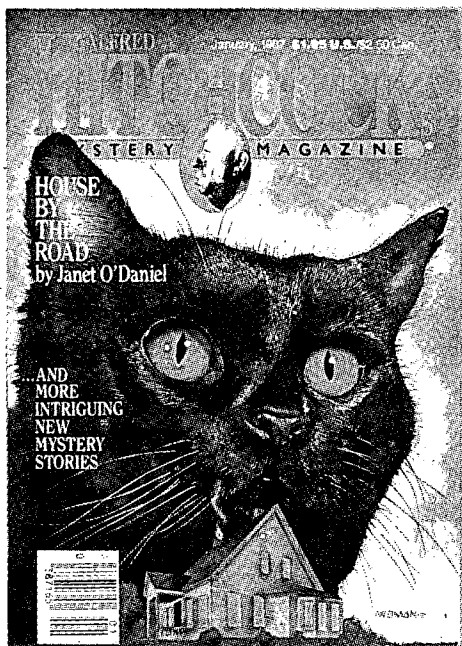
AHMM's readers. Loren Estleman was there and, as we mentioned in the February Editor's Notes, picked up a Shamus award for "Eight Mile and Dequindre" (AHMM, May, 1985). John Lutz, Ed Hunsburger, Ron Goulart, Ed Hoch, and Chris Steinbrunner showed up, too, and, as a matter of fact, Chris was the Fan Guest of Honor. Patricia Moyes came to Baltimore as well, to speak on a panel of British writers.

The convention's special Guest of Honor was Donald Westlake. There was another honor conferred on Saturday, when the Private Eye Writers, in an emotional ceremony, gave their Life Achievement Award to Richard S. Prather, author of the Shell Scott series. The PWA also announced that the winner of their novel contest, co-sponsored by St. Martin's Press, was Les Roberts, with *An Infinite Number of Monkeys*. The book will be published by St. Martin's in the coming year.

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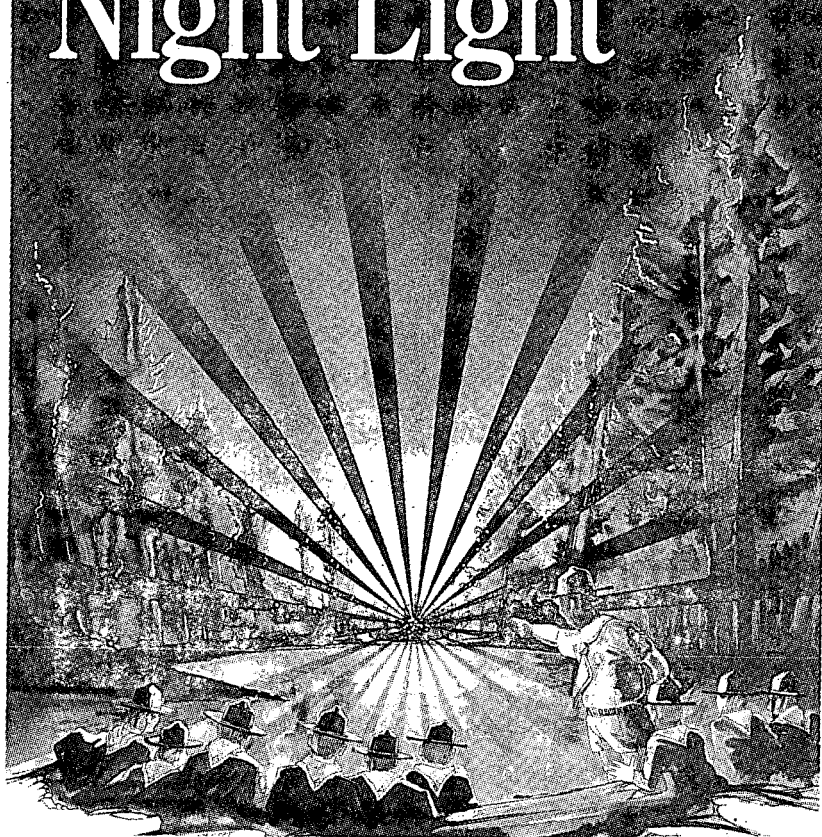
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FICTION

Night Light



by Al and Mary Kuhfeld

It started when a large object—circular, outlined with eerie lights—traveled with stately slowness across the evening Minnesota sky. It moved too slowly for an aircraft, and it made only a whisper of sound, as if powered by the ghost of a

motor. Someone noticed that it was moving against the wind. Then, even as switchboards at the police and fire departments lit up like the Fourth of July, it was gone. It made page two in the next morning's *Hedebly Herald*.

Illustration by Jim Odbert

Two nights later, Thursday, a farmer reported that something had gotten among his beef cattle in their nighttime pasture and killed two of them, leaving them in a boggy mire that had not been there the day before—and it had not rained in Hedeby County for over a month. The head of one had been neatly removed, and the other had been deprived of a leg. There were palm-sized circles of singe scattered over both animals. The vet said it looked as if they'd been electrocuted.

Whoever—whatever—did it had left no traces in the mud. This time the local TV news reporter did a feature on it, and the Minneapolis *Star and Tribune* phoned to inquire. The story was picked up by the wire services, but received little play.

Monday morning, a big old fashioned "woody" station wagon slid to a halt in front of the Hedeby police station, and some half dozen Boy Scouts piled out behind the traditional plump scoutmaster, faces filled with less-traditional terror. They ran into the station, confronted the desk sergeant, and began telling what had brought them in in such a mad rush.

"... scared all night by. . ."

"... big blue lights and. . ."

"... loud noises. . ."

"... smashed his cabin. . ."

"... dead body!"

But being taken to the up-

stairs of a police station is a settling experience, even when the station is small and friendly as Hedeby's was. Something in the stolid patience of the cop bringing up the rear told them they had crossed unwarned that sudden line between freedom and custody. By the time they reached the two desks shoved head to head in the middle of the small squadroom, man and boys had been reduced to silence.

Detective Sergeant Thor Nygaard turned toward them from the nearer desk. He was a very large man with football shoulders, pale blond hair, and a Joe Palooka jaw. A half-empty coffee mug was almost entirely hidden in one massive paw. His cool blue eyes were steady on them while the cop explained their presence.

Sergeant Jack Hafner, at the farther desk, also studied this disruption to his morning. He was smaller only by comparison, darker, trimly built, with sea-gray eyes even cooler than his partner's. The scouts shuffled uncomfortably.

"Uh, we, uh, want to report a murder," said the leader. "I think."

"Think, Wendal?" said Hafner. Hedeby was a city by grace of its charter, but in fact a small town. All its city officials knew one another by first name. Wendal Fridlund was county

clerk as well as scoutmaster.

"It was a flying saucer," offered the littlest scout, plump as Wendal, whom he resembled in facial features as well.

"Now, Henry, we don't know that—" began Wendal.

"Yeah, but something really spooky was going on across the lake, that's for sure," said another scout, setting off a chorus of corroborative detail.

"How about we let Mr. Fridlund tell us what happened," suggested Nygaard, slicing firmly into the babble and silencing it. "Sit down, Wendal; you look all in." The big detective gestured at a hard wooden chair parked crossways to the end of his desk.

"Well, I am tired, Thor; I didn't sleep a wink last night," admitted the scoutmaster, sinking down with a sigh.

"You want to tell us about it?" said Hafner, getting up and coming around so he, too, could watch the scoutmaster's face.

"We'd been sitting around the campfire making s'mores and telling ghost stories—though we never got to the point where anyone was really scared, or anything; they're all too big to be scared by that stuff any more." Fridlund scratched absently at a dimpled knee. "It was eleven—time to shut down for the night—so I sent Henry and Nels to the lake with buckets. The rest of us began spad-

ing dirt onto the campfire. They brought the water and poured it over the dirt while I stirred, and the hissing was just starting to quit when we heard this scream." Wendal's pink face puckered up, and the boys made uncomfortable sounds in the background. "I never in my entire life heard a scream like that, and I was in combat in Korea. It made the hair on my arms stand up. We all just froze, listening, but it didn't happen again. It was awful quiet for a while; even the frogs and crickets shut up after that scream."

"There was just the one scream?" said Hafner.

"Uh-huh, then this other noise started. It was a weird sound, I never heard one like it before. I can't describe it." One of the boys began emitting a high-pitched wheedle with a lot of air in it, and the others nodded and pointed to him.

"Yes, it was just like that. Thank you, Gerald," said Wendal, and Gerald subsided, blushing with importance. "Not really loud, but you know how sound can carry across water. It was coming from across the lake, the same direction the scream came from. That's all private land over there, you know; Camp Nokomis has only half the lake. We hadn't seen a bit of activity over there—this being the weekend after Labor Day, everyone's pretty much

closed up their cottages. But now, Sunday night, this terrible scream and odd noise.

"We grabbed a couple of lanterns and started for the beach to take a better look. There was a light on in one of the cabins, about where we were hearing the noise from. Then this real bright blue light just filled the trees over there like with a blue mist, and beams of it seemed to be coming down from the sky, and then sending fingers of it reaching across the lake right toward us." Wendal stopped to consider whether that might be a bit florid, decided it was accurate, and ran a downward-pointed finger across his forehead in a sweat-removing gesture. "Now, I'm no coward." The cops nodded; Wendal had once faced down a bull that had cornered Henry in a pasture, and only last year dropped a garbage drum over a rabid skunk that had wandered into the scout campground.

Wendal continued, "I grabbed the two nearest boys, hollered at the rest to follow me, and we all ran into my tent and zipped her shut. We felt around in the dark and found two of the hatchets, a bowie knife, Henry's Swiss army knife, and two barbecue forks. I'm proud of my boys; they were scared, but they were ready to stand and fight if something tried to get into that tent."

Nygaard glanced around at the boys, who were all trying to look as if that were true.

"But whatever it was stayed on its own side of the lake," continued Wendal. "There were more noises, like tree branches breaking, big ones. Hooting, like giant owls. Groans. Hisses. And a big, ripping crash." His eye was caught by Nygaard's. "I am not exaggerating, and it seemed to go on for hours. We could sometimes see that light shining right through the tent, big and bright, like it was about to cross that lake and do unto us. Then the noise kind of faded away and stopped; and when we looked out, it was all dark there. But we stayed in that tent until daybreak, just in case."

"And because of that scream, you decided to come here and report a murder-you-think?" said Hafner.

"No. You see, Nels had told a story about a house where every so often there's a noise like a piano falling downstairs, only when they check, there isn't even a speck of dust out of place. Laugh if you like—" indeed, Nygaard's blond head was back and his great haw, haw, haw was filling the room—"but I wasn't going to come in with a report of all this and have you go out and find nothing. We hiked out to the parking lot and drove around the lake. It wasn't hard to find Ollie Andersen's

place—what's left of it. His cabin looks like some giant foot stepped on it. Roof all caved in and a wall down. There's trees snapped off and busted up all over the ground. There's a stink—" Again Wendal stopped, this time to wrinkle his nose. "An animal stink, like a zoo that needs its cages cleaned. And in the middle of all this was Ollie." One of the boys made a sound like a sob, and Wendal wiped his forehead with a forefinger again. "If a ghost or a thing from outer space kills someone, is it murder? We didn't go too close, but Ollie's deader'n anyone laying out just overnight should be."

Oliver Andersen was in fact very dead. The medical examiner, bent over the body, kept making a face very much like the one Wendal had made in describing it. The body was swollen and discolored. An arm appeared to have been dissected, and there were other unpleasantnesses. It was sprinkled with a yellowish powder, and there was a cathouse stink about it that had spread to the leafy mould it lay on. When the M.E. at last had it loaded into a rubber bag and taken away, the cops sighed with relief and began their investigation.

Two good-sized trees had been snapped off near their bases,

and a number of smaller ones were shattered as well; the ground was covered with fresh bark and wood fragments.

All around the ruined cabin the ground was thoroughly soaked. Hafner picked up something like a scrap of plastic trash bag, thicker than any trash bag he had ever seen. The article was marked, its location noted, and it was put away in case it was evidence.

An overnight bag found inside the ruined cabin indicated Andersen had had a guest. Tucked into a folded flannel shirt was a wallet.

"Victor Norbeck," said Hafner, looking at the driver's license. "What the devil was he doing out here?"

Norbeck and Andersen had once been partners in a waste disposal firm. There had been a serious quarrel over a twenty-three thousand dollar cash shortage, and each had publicly accused the other of theft. They dissolved the company and never spoke directly to one another again. Each had, however, spoken for the record to the press, and brought consequent suits for defamation on each other—thereby gaining the right to subpoena one another's private documents.

None of the documents had so far exposed the thief, but other pieces of dirty laundry kept coming to light and were

dutifully put on public record. Ollie Andersen had been keeping a mistress in Minneapolis. Victor Norbeck had cheated on his income tax. Andersen had pornographic books and videotapes sent to a post office box he rented under an assumed name. Norbeck had made substantial campaign donations to both Republican and Democratic candidates for tax assessor. The citizens of Hedeby were delightfully scandalized by it all.

Both men knew they could no longer make a living in Hedeby—the Andersen cabin and the Norbeck condo were for sale—because while the town was laughing at both of them, it was also disgusted with both of them. Andersen's wife had kicked him out of their house (which was why he was living in the cabin); and Norbeck's sister said she was sorry but she felt he would be a bad influence on her children and he'd better not visit them any more.

So what had they been doing together? Maybe, mused Hafner, their mutual problems had finally brought the two to their senses, and they had met to work things out.

Only where was Norbeck?

On the other side of the ruined cabin there was a large oval of scorched, dead grass. "Sloppy pilot," muttered one of the cops.

"What's that, Tommy?" asked Nygaard.

Tommy pointed. "See, the flying saucer missed on its first pass and squashed the cabin. Then it landed here, alongside."

"Flying saucer?" drawled Hafner, and Nygaard turned away with a heavy sigh.

Embarrassed, the cop doggedly added, "No, I'm serious; this has the earmarks of a close encounter. If the news stories are right, if a spacecraft landed here, the burnt place should be radioactive."

"You been reading too many tabloids," said Nygaard. But a cop near the center of the oval decided he'd scuffled the black dust thoroughly enough, and walked with what he hoped would pass as a casual pace out of it. Two others who had been standing on the edge of the oval backed up.

"Now see what you started," demanded Nygaard. "How can we conduct an investigation if everybody's all spooked about flying saucers?"

Tommy folded his arms. "I'm only saying you should keep an open mind. A thousand people saw that UFO the other night, and it wasn't a lost wolf from the iron range that killed two of Mr. Hagedorn's beef cattle. And where's Victor Norbeck?"

"Wherever he is, it isn't in a flying saucer," said Hafner, his

sea-gray eyes growing stormy.

Nygaard said, "Maybe we can stop this nonsense right now." The big man went out on the road where the Police Reserve van was parked. The van dated from the old days, when the reserves were called Civil Defense; the old emblem could still be traced under the new paint on the door. Nygaard looked in the back, and sure enough, the old geiger counter case was still there. The case had been spot-welded to the floor, and no one had thought to remove the counter and put something else in the case. The batteries were dead but the reservist lent them some from his flashlight, and Nygaard carried the clicking device back to the scene.

As he approached, the clicks came closer together; then, when he held the geiger counter down to the spot, the clicks came so fast they were a buzz.

"See?" said Tommy, vindicated. "See? I told you."

A thorough search for Victor Norbeck was performed, spreading in later hours from the Andersen property onto neighboring properties and into the lake. But no trace was found.

Andersen's body was a shock; but Norbeck's disappearance was spooky. There was no sign

that something violent had happened to a second body anywhere on the scene, yet Norbeck was not at home and no one had seen him for at least twenty-four hours. His big-tired pickup was not in its slot behind his apartment building. They found evidence that a fat-tired vehicle with a large wheelbase had pulled in beside Andersen's car at the cabin. It wasn't there now, though Andersen's Cordova was.

The Cordova, though its battery was fully charged, would not start, would not even turn over; nor would its headlights or other electrical systems work. By Sunday afternoon the news people from as far away as Chicago were asking about satellite uplinks at Hedeby's little television station.

Early Tuesday morning, a big dusty pickup pulled wearily into a gas station outside of Hedeby. Harold Nilsson, owner/operator, barely awake, came out to see what this early-bird wanted, and found a man sitting behind the wheel in a dazed condition.

"Fill it up for you?" asked Nilsson.

"Fill—" The man's head came slowly around. "I'm empty," he agreed. "Hungry," he amended.

"Hey, you all right, mister?"

"Where am I?"

"Highway 49 and County Road DD. Where you headed?"

"I'd like to go home now, please."

"Where's that?"

The man frowned, then shook his head. "I'm sorry."

"Well, what's your name?"

"I think..." He shrugged, looked at Nilsson with scared eyes. "They called me ... Earthman."

"I think you better not drive any more right now, okay?"

The man looked at his hands gripping the steering wheel. "No more driving," he said, relieved, and relaxed the hands until they slid off the wheel. Then he stumbled out of the truck and went into the station. Nilsson trailed a wary distance behind him, watched the man study the pay phone on the wall a thought-gathering while, then reach into his pocket and pull out not coins but a fistful of the same yellowish dust that covered his pickup. He sifted this onto the floor, sat down beside it, and began to cry.

An ambulance took Norbeck—for he was in fact the missing man—to St. Mary's in Hedeby, where he was pronounced exhausted and in shock. He was admitted and put to bed and went immediately to sleep. A few hours later the county extension agent announced that the mysterious powder that had filled Norbeck's pockets, dusted his truck,

and sifted across Andersen's body was lycopodium, the spores of mushrooms.

A small crowd gathered in the hall outside Norbeck's hospital room: four daily newspaper reporters, two radio announcers, and a woman who claimed she was a stringer for one of the tabloids. There was even a TV camera crew from a network news program. Other patients well enough to take an interest were all agog at the lights and talk, and several of the nurses were interviewed by newshounds with impatient editors.

Hafner wanted to lay legal hands on Norbeck, bring him to the squad room and ask him pointed questions. But the police hadn't been notified that Norbeck had been found until after he'd been admitted, and by the time the two detectives got to the hospital, Norbeck was safely asleep and the corridor outside his room was a circus of impatient, cynical, and nosy reporters.

Thor Nygaard took up a position at Norbeck's bedside. He was the larger of the two, better able to handle any hysterics from the man, or opportunistic maneuvers on the part of the press. Jack Hafner went off to continue investigating what one reporter, looking into the camera with pontifical solemnity, named the "best-documented

close encounter of the decade." The chief called it "that damned Andersen murder."

Hafner dug up records, asked questions, and in fairly short order found himself in the company of a professor from the university, Dr. John Christianson, who had something he called a gamma spectrometer. It sat in the back of his van, tied down: a large, round, cold thing that breathed vapor when disturbed. Cables snaked everywhere, connecting enough boxes of assorted colors to make an electronics wizard groan. Dr. Christianson wanted to examine the radioactive scorchmark.

"Studying the radiation could tell us a lot about the power source of this flying saucer." His blue eyes twinkled. "Or it might prove a defect in your geiger counter. And it will be a nice field test of the portable spectrometer." Which was the real reason he'd come down from the Twin Cities, probably. Dr. Christianson was an enthusiast, a believer in testing field equipment under field conditions. A tall, thin man, his hair had once been fiery red. The red had faded to blond and gray, but the freckles remained. They drove to the ruined cabin and Christianson got out to see what the bumpy ride might have done to his equipment. But it

was built well and nothing was damaged. They scooped up a sample of the scorched earth for the machine, and soon a spiky green line was growing across the computer display.

Freckled hands rattled across a keyboard; the display froze, then grew letters and numbers. "Interesting," Christianson grunted. "Americium-241."

"What's that?" Hafner asked.

"It's a transuranic—a synthetic element. Doesn't exist in nature; somebody has to make it."

"What's it used for?"

"On Earth? Smoke detectors."

"It's really strange," said Hafner over the phone to Nygaard. "We can't make Americium without making a whole lot of other elements at the same time, the professor says. Kind of like cracking oil to get naptha. What did they do with the rest of the stuff? And why use naptha for fuel? Gasoline's better."

"Please, Jack," Nygaard begged. "Don't catch any flying saucers. I'm trapped here between the reporters and their prey; and they've been trying all afternoon to get an official admission from me that a flying saucer did all this. Prove Norbeck did it. Prove *I* did it. But please don't prove little green

men from outer space did it!"

The newspaper and TV people had all gone off in search of dinner. Nygaard persuaded a nurse to bring him a pot of coffee—a single cup was never enough—but he was only halfway through his second cup when Chief Thorpe called. "What the hell are you two up to?" he demanded.

"We're investigating the Andersen murder," said Nygaard, who could be very literal.

"Yeah, but you been driving Stark in the lab nuts. Test this for PCB's, how do you set magnesium on fire, how many pounds of pull to break a seven-inch aspen off at the base? And Hafner just drove by here with Joe Swenson and his bloodhound. I repeat, what are you two up to?"

"Chief, do you believe in flying saucers?"

Thorpe hung up, and Nygaard was left in peace for an hour.

The news people got back from dinner, to find Norbeck awake. Thor Nygaard watched from the door, no longer the center of attention, while Norbeck himself held audience inside.

"I remember most of it, but there's chunks missing," he said. "A lot of it was like a dream. I was visiting Ollie at his cabin. He'd invited me out to see if we

couldn't find a way to put an end to our feud. I remember arriving, but then there's a blank. Something happened, something noisy, I think; then I woke up in this big white room strapped to a table like an operating table, and there were these little pale guys in green robes looking at me. No noses, and no ears. No hair or eyelashes. Pale skin, the color of—of mushrooms. Real long fingers, skinny and delicate. No fingernails. One of 'em had a little, bitty box he wore hanging around his neck, and a kind of squeaky voice came out of it whenever he wanted to talk to me. I never saw 'em talk to each other.

"They took me out of that room to another room. They had my truck there; they put me in the truck and told me to start it, and drive. They had some kind of trick camera that made scenes in front of the windshield; and I must've drove over every kind of terrain in the universe, hours and hours, while they stood around and watched. The scenes were three-D, and when I'd run over something, the truck would jump. And when I'd crash, it would hurt, only then I'd be all right and it would start in again. They wouldn't let me stop. Man, the first thing I'm gonna do when I get out of here is sell that truck. I don't ever want my

backside to rest on that seat again."

The phone rang. It was Jack Hafner, and Nygaard could hear the grin in his voice. "We got him."

"Who?"

"The little green man. Or he will be, in just a few minutes." Hafner explained the progress of the investigation, concluding, "Is he awake?"

Nygaard looked at Norbeck who was obliging the reporters by making a sketch of the alien and his squeaky box. "Yep."

"Good. Watch him close; I'll be there in five minutes."

Hafner was as good as his word. Norbeck was describing the control cabin of the saucer when he was interrupted by a strange noise outside his window. It was a high, whistling, warbling noise, very much like the sound Gerald the Boy Scout had made in the upstairs squad room.

Norbeck ignored the sound for a few seconds, then turned toward it as if annoyed—then started violently. He threw the covers off the bed and leaped to the floor, shoving reporters out of the way. "It's them!" he shouted. "They've come to take me back!"

Large hands landed on Norbeck's shoulders, and he looked up into a calm, pleasant face

under a sheaf of blond hair. "Take it easy, Victor," said Nygaard. "The only people after you are us. You are under arrest for the malicious killing of cattle, for destruction of property, and for the murder of Oliver Andersen. You have a right to remain silent. If you give up the right to remain silent, you have a right to consult with an attorney before questioning, and to have an attorney present during questioning. Do you understand these rights as I have explained them to you?"

Norbeck had been backing up during all of this, back to his bed, onto the bed. He tucked his feet under the sheet and coverlet. "No," he said.

"No, what?" asked Nygaard.

"It was those little men, the men with mushroom faces."

"Lay off him, okay?" said the woman reporter. "Can't you see he's scared half to death?"

But one of the other reporters had gone to the window to look out. "C'mere, Joey; get a shot of this!" he said, gesturing at the man with the TV camera on his shoulder. "Look, over there!" There was a rush of reporters to the window, but Norbeck didn't even look in that direction.

"What is it?" asked the cameraman, trying to push through the crowd, then, "Aw, it's nothing but a pickup truck!"

A reporter said, "Yeah, but what's that on top of the exhaust pipe? See? Sticking up beside the cab?"

Another reporter said, "I dunno, but it's what's making the weird noise; see how those people are trying to make the driver shut his engine off?"

"Why don't you go down and ask?" suggested Nygaard. "No telling what else the driver of that truck can tell you about our investigation."

Which wouldn't be much, but it cleared the room. "It's a caliope whistle, right, Victor?" said Nygaard to Norbeck when they were gone. "To disguise the sound of an engine under stress. If I wanted to use my bumper winch to pull down a couple of trees, someone hearing it might be able to tell what was happening unless I disguised the sound. It'd work just as well for the generator on back, in case I felt like electrocuting a cow or two, or maybe a business partner."

They'd taken Norbeck off to the police station, for booking; and the reporters had scattered like the construction crew at the Tower of Babel. Hafner and Nygaard spent a couple of hours questioning Norbeck, then taking down his statement which would be presented with other evidence to the county prosecutor.

Then they went to unwind at the Uff-Da Inn. They were not surprised to find Don Olavsen, reporter for the Hedeby *Herald*, already waiting at their usual table.

"You look pleased with yourself, Jack," Olavsen said. "Sit down. Relax. Have a beer." He snagged the passing waitress. "And then, perhaps, you can tell the local press a bit more than the pitiful few nuggets you gave the out-of-towners. Or do I have to wait until Norbeck's book comes out?" He looked at the two surprised faces of his friends. "Didn't you hear? He's looking for an agent."

Hafner made a disgusted sound. He waited until his Schell's came, then again while he savored its flavor. "You know we can't spill our case before the trial." He took another, deeper drink. "But I must admit, this one's a stinker. And it would be nice to have somebody get it all-the-way right for once, not just rework what's left after the lawyers get through. Promise not to let things out until they've been brought up in court? But that you'll break the story in time to spoil any book deal Norbeck might be making?"

Olavsen crossed his heart and hoped to die. And since he'd always kept that particular oath, they told him.

"We figured from the start it

was Norbeck," Nygaard began, "because he was the one with the motive. He stole the twenty-three thousand from the disposal firm, and Andersen finally found out about it. He told his lawyer about it, and though the proof itself is still missing, the lawyer will be able to testify about that conversation."

Hafner continued, "The problem wasn't lack of evidence—there was evidence all over the place: the shattered trees, the squashed cabin, the strip of plastic, the yellow powder, the animal stink, the mud. The problem was finding an explanation for it, sifting the important out of the unimportant, and linking it all to Norbeck. That might have proved difficult. Norbeck was a professional disposer, if not a very honest one. He and Andersen were being sued for illegal dumping in half a dozen places, from the days when they were a disposal company. Didn't the *Herald* kick off that investigation?"

"A former employee tipped us off," nodded Olavsen. "Said they were so sloppy it scared him into quitting."

"Sloppy is right," said Hafner. "Joe Swenson's bloodhound found a trail of that stink from where Andersen's body was found to the place where the truck was parked, and again on a pair of trousers at a dis-

posal site—along with a lot of other interesting items."

"Andersen's trousers?" asked Olavsen.

"Norbeck's, by the look of them," said Hafner. "We found out from their records where they'd been burying stuff, and took the bloodhound around to them. Third place we tried, he bayed and pawed the ground, so we dug and found all sorts of stuff."

"Dr. Christianson's spectrometer found Americium-241 at the site of the murder, and in Norbeck's old workshop. It was on the same trousers the hound dug up, too."

"There was a big glass beaker, radioactive as all get-out, with traces of acid in the bottom. And there were lots of smoke detectors, old ones, with the innards ripped apart. Open up your own smoke detector: that little metal box is radioactive. Americium-241, just like the mark out at Andersen's cabin. Dissolve a couple of dozen of those boxes in acid and slosh it over the grass, and you'll get a radioactive scorch mark, all right. The stink? That was a half empty bottle of the stuff deer hunters pour on their boots to keep the deer from smelling them. Disgusting stuff; I'd sooner let a deer get away from me than have that pong hanging around me all day."

"And then we found an Ag

Bag, one of those things the farmers use for storage when the silo or granary is full. It was in two pieces, and one of them heat sealed around a hose. It had burst, and the bit of plastic we found at the cabin fits into the tear. What you want to bet the water still in it analyzes as coming from Andersen's well-pump?"

Nygaard was grinning at Olavsen. "Don't you see? Figure that sealed-up bag was twelve square. Put it up on a roof, empty, and hook the hose to a pump, and it'll weigh over ten tons before it's full. Enough to squash a cabin, easy."

Hafner continued. "The fusible links on Andersen's car were blown—easy to do, hard to find. And we found a boom box with a cassette tape still in it. Careless and sloppy. Because we played that tape, after fingerprinting it, and found it was a selection of sound effects. Guess whose fingerprints were on it?"

"There was a batch of magnesium curls—somebody must have been machining the stuff—and they would burn with a nice blue-white light. A bit of mist on the lake, the shadows of trees: there are your fingers of light reaching towards the scout camp.

"People throw the damndest things away—and Norbeck was the hazardous waste man for the whole county. At this point,

it looks like almost everything that happened at Oliver Andersen's cabin can be explained by the contents of that dump."

"The only thing we can't figure out," said Nygaard, "is the thing that started this off. That flying saucer everyone saw about a week ago."

At this, Don set down his beer and raised his index finger. "Never underestimate the power of the press," he declaimed. "That one is the lead story on tomorrow's 'Lifestyles' page."

Nygaard leaned well into Olavsen's space. "Give," he said.

"It's the flying club, out at the airport. They've been practicing flying in formation for an air show. They were out late one evening with their landing lights on, and the ground watcher said it looked as if a flying saucer had buzzed the field. Your mind fills in the blanks: get a bunch of lights in a circle, against a dark background, all moving in unison—next thing you know, people are reporting a circular object outlined with lights. At anything over five or six thousand feet you barely hear the engines. They've been making jokes about how everyone thinks they've been buzzed by a saucer. The club cafe even has a 'saucer plate' for \$3.95—'unidentified frying objects.'"

Nygaard began to laugh his great haw, haw, haw. "That's

what gave Norbeck the idea," he said, still laughing.

"The jerk," agreed Hafner, more soberly, seeing the mutilated body of Oliver Andersen with his mind's eye. There had been a lot of hatred between the two, but nothing could justify what Norbeck had done to his former partner.

"But what set you off so hard after him?" asked Olavsen. "I mean, didn't you even think for a minute it could really be a close encounter?"

"The close encounter hap-

pened when Norbeck cranked up that generator, dropped a chain off the back of his truck for a ground, then went and honked at Ollie to come out and lay hands on the truck. That was the scream Wendel heard: Ollie dying by electrocution."

"It's simple, Don," said Nygaard. "Norbeck was dumb enough to give us just two choices: him or flying saucers. And he did a good job, making it look like a saucer.

"But neither Jack nor me believes in flying saucers."

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FICTION

My Brother's Life

by Rob Kantner



Illustration by Joe Jereda

21

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As my brother climbed down from his mud-stained sky-blue Ford Econoline van, I slid off the hood of my Mustang, tossed away my cigar butt, and hoofed toward him. "Jesus H. Christ, Bill!"

He looked up at me from beneath his old porkpie fishing hat. "What's the problem, Benjy?"

"You're late, that's what's the problem."

He grimaced. "You're calling me late?"

"Hey, bro, for you to be twenty minutes late is like me never showing up at all."

"Uh-huh." He started toward the back of the van. "You gonna stand here flapping, or are you gonna help me with this."

I walked back with my brother, surreptitiously giving him the once-over. At first glance there was nothing unusual. Bill was very short, five four just maybe. He had a large mostly bald head, a large nose and a small mouth; broad shoulders, small hips, and tiny feet. He wore an old flannel shirt with the sleeves whacked off, over dark blue twill trousers tucked into rubber hip-waders. Dressed for fishing, as he'd been every Fourth of July as far back as I could remember.

But there was something

radically different about him today, and after a moment I realized what it was. Bill hadn't shaved in a couple of days.

We unhitched the trailer and, grunting with effort, wheeled it around and down to the lake's edge. Bill unsecured the aluminum boat, we slid it into the water, then loaded up the fishing tackle.

I boarded the boat and sat on the forward bench. Bill sloshed us back into deeper water, then climbed aboard, stumbled past me toward the stern, and fired up the Mercury outboard.

We swerved and picked up speed, gliding across the glassy water toward the center of Stapfer Lake. I stared forward and said nothing. Bill didn't either, but that wasn't unusual. Bill wasn't a talker, never had been. It was usually up to me to keep the conversation going, following our well-defined agenda of cars, tools, baseball, and the old neighborhood.

All the way out here I'd been half-dreading, as I did every Fourth, a solid day alone in a boat, fishing with Bill. Wondering how I'd endure the boredom.

But now, after seeing his muddy van, his tardiness, and his unshaved face, I had no such worries. Because I knew that something was wrong with Bill.

Seriously wrong.

By ten, we'd each eaten two Slim Jims, drunk one beer, and caught zero fish. I was smoking a cigar and watching the green water. Bill and I had caught up on cars fairly well and had pretty much beat tools to death. There was a long silence, and then Bill cleared his throat. I thought we were about to embark on a discussion of baseball—not that this year's Detroit Tigers were worth more than five minutes of discussion—but he surprised me. "You know anyone who can run license plate numbers, Ben?"

That well-honed private detective instinct of mine said: Ah-ha! I glanced at him. "Sure, no problem. Hell, you can do it yourself if you want to write up to DMV in Lansing."

"No, *huh-uh*," he said, giving his fishing rod a couple of experimental tugs. "I don't want to do that. Never mind."

I shrugged. "I'll get it run if you want."

"I said never mind." Voice soft and toneless.

I shifted and looked at him. "Bill, if there's a problem to do with a plate number, let's get the poop and move on it."

He looked back at me hard. "You deaf, Benjy? I said forget it!"

"Then why the hell'd you ask me for?" I shot back.

His normally stoical expression broke into resignation. "Because I was hoping you'd say no."

"You're not making a lick of sense here."

Bill gave his rod another tug, then with quick economical movements reeled in his line. When the hook broke the surface I saw that his bait was gone. Bill carefully laid the rod in the bottom of the boat and leaned back against the gunwale, using an orange life jacket as a cushion. The brim of his hat kept his eyes shadowed. "I think I mighta seen somebody killed, Ben."

I lowered my rod, braced it between my boots, and fished myself another beer out of the Coleman cooler that sat between the benches. As I snapped the top I said casually, "What do you mean, 'mighta.'"

Bill sat there motionless as the boat swayed lightly in the almost imperceptible chop. He was as he'd always been, my big brother Bill, emotionless as the sphinx, solid, predictable, intensely private. At that moment I felt the familiar urge to back off. Bill was eight years older than me and had, till I left home, called the shots; confronting him was an unfamiliar experience for me, even though we'd been men for over twenty-five years. But I didn't back off.

I let my silence speak for itself.

Finally he said, "You heard about Jerry Borgia?"

I swallowed my mouthful of beer carefully and lowered the can. "Yeah."

"I saw who did it," Bill said.

I'd read the papers. Hell, the story had run on second front above the fold, you couldn't miss it. I remembered that the hit had happened in Dynamite Park, and I wondered what Bill was doing way the hell over there. To give myself time to think, I picked up my rod, reeled in the line, and propped the rod slantways in the boat. "So tell the cops," I said.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I just can't."

Though it was early we ate lunch, cold corned beef sandwiches prepared by Bill's wife Marybeth; washed down with beer prepared by the Pabst Corporation of Perry, Georgia. Neither one of us said anything. God knows what was on Bill's mind; mine was in a turmoil.

Jerry Borgia was an executive with one of the bigger unions. A local bigshot in his own right—he was president of the principal Detroit local—he had also made some waves nationally by declaring himself a candidate for the international presidency. This had earned

him a large amount of generally sympathetic publicity, inasmuch as Borgia was, unlike most union executives, a young man, handsome and thin, articulate, passionate, and up from the ranks. Some editorialists had even been bold enough to predict that Borgia was a new wave in the union movement, a throwback to the original ideals, a strong contrast to his Vegas-junketing, limousine-riding, weak-chinned, pot-bellied predecessors who fronted for organized crime, played golf with ex-presidents, and ended up dead or in jail.

Predictably enough, Jerry Borgia didn't end up in jail, he just ended up dead.

He was found behind the wheel of his car in a remote section of Dynamite Park. Somebody had stuck a .22 pistol in his left ear and blown his brains out. According to the papers, the police had no witnesses and no clues, kind of like the Hoffa case, except in this instance they'd found the stiff.

I finished my sandwich, uncorked a beer, lighted up a fresh cigar, and asked, "What'd you see, Bill?"

He coughed and cleared his throat and brushed his stubbly chin with his knuckles and talked, almost to himself. "I was parked there, and I happened to see this car with a man alone behind the wheel. Kind

of a remote area, in the spit of land where the Rouge takes the big bend, you know?"

I knew. Dynamite Park runs for a thousand acres on the far west side of Detroit, not far from where we grew up. Though it's equipped with picnic areas, playgrounds, and pastoral scenes, it's anything but bucolic. Dynamite Park is a place where bad things can happen, and usually do.

I nodded at Bill. "Go on."

He refused to look at me. "This car sat there for a long time. A Cadillac car, practically new, custom job, tinted glass. After a while another car pulled up and parked near it. A Dodge Omni. Brand new. The driver got out, walked over to the Caddy, leaned down at the driver's side door. The window went down. Fella stayed there for a while. Then he went back to the Omni and fired her up and drove away."

It tied in. According to the papers, Borgia had been found dead in the front seat of his Cadillac Seville in the heart of Dynamite Park.

I drank a little more beer and fired up a cigar, planning my words with great precision. "You made the plate, huh?"

"Yeah," my brother answered. "I'd know the guy again, too, if I saw him."

Nothing left to ask but the real tough questions. "So what

were you doing out there? You work at Ford's in Wayne, Dynamite Park's ten-plus miles away."

Bill looked over his shoulder back toward land. "I was visiting with a lady. We were in her car, having a little lunch."

Oh-ho. Oh-ho, oh-ho. "That why you can't go to the cops?"

Bill looked back at me. "It was innocent, Ben. Nothing to it. Just a friend."

"But you don't want Marybeth to know," I concluded.

"It's more than that," Bill said. I watched him patiently as he looked down at his lap and said, with great difficulty, "Gale—my friend—she's dead. She was strangled early last week."

"Oh, God."

Bill went on with more animation than I'd ever heard from him. "It was *him* did it. I'm positive. Somehow he found out who I am, what I saw. Now he's hanging around, watching me."

"Sending you a message," I prompted.

"Yeah." Bill chewed the inside of his cheek. "I tell the police what I saw, he'll—"

"Kill somebody."

"Not me. Not first."

"Marybeth," I concluded.

Bill opened a fresh beer, his third. I was impressed; Bill let the Carter administration

go by without having that many. I leaned back against the gunwale and propped one ankle over the other knee. "Ain't too hard to figure what happened," I said.

Bill looked at me through hooded eyes and did not speak.

"The shooter made your girlfriend's plate."

"She wasn't my girlfriend," Bill said.

"Tracked her down," I went on, "got your name out of her, wasted her. Now he's hanging around you. Watching. Letting you know the same treatment's on the menu for you if you don't stay tame."

"How do you know all this," Bill growled.

"It's my business, bro," I said easily. "I been in this work a lot of years now. I know these guys. It's how he'd operate. And it's working. Look at you, you're running scared." I ticked fingers. "Van's dirty. Big obvious sign right there. You ran late today, something you never do. And you haven't shaved." I smiled at him. "You be in a heap of trouble, bro, and you know it."

Bill sat there and stared at his big knuckly hands. "I don't know what to do," he said softly.

"You can go to the cops."

"Then Marybeth will find out," he answered.

I sighed. "What's worse? That, or her or you dead?"

"There's got to be some other way." Bill tipped his beer can back and caught the flow in his mouth, swallowing hard. He dropped the empty into the bottom of the boat with a clank. "I can't let this guy walk. But I can't put Marybeth in jeopardy either—"

"Nor," I interrupted, "can you let Marybeth find out you were with another woman."

"It was innocent."

"I'm not the one you have to convince, am I?"

Bill dropped his chin into his palms. "Can you help me somehow?"

I smiled at him, relishing, to be totally honest, the thought that my big brother, Mom and Daddy's favorite, the solid, secure, approved one, needed help from the kid brother here. "There's some stuff we can try," I answered.

"Starting soon?"

"Tomorrow."

After a long wait, a tall grayhaired man in his fifties breezed into the office, tossed a blank legal pad onto the table, and seated himself across from me. "Wes Malcolm," he said.

"Good morning, Wes," Carole Somers said from the head of the table. She made a careful note on her pad, then addressed the group. "No doubt some introductions are in order. I'm

Carole Somers, representing Mr. Ben Perkins and Mr. William Perkins. From the police department we have Captain Elvin Dance, chief of the Homicide section. Mr. Wes Malcolm represents the district attorney's office." She whisked a strand of blonde hair off her forehead and asked Dance, "Is this the entire group, captain?"

"Guess so," Dance said. He was a burly, block-shouldered black man with close-shaved, tightly knit hair, wearing a luminous gray pinstriped vest over a crisp, starched-white shirt and fashionably narrow smoky-red tie. He made Malcolm, the assistant D.A., look shabby in his shirtsleeves and drooping bow tie. "Not that I have any idea what this is about," Dance added. "But if it has to do with old Ben over there, it's bound to be big bad trouble."

Wes Malcolm glanced at Dance. "You know him, I take it."

Dance's eyes widened with mock amazement. "You mean you're unfamiliar with the legendary Mistah Ben Perkins, private dee-tective? Hey hey my my." His expression was not entirely fond. "We've tangled here and there, along the way." He gave Bill a toothy, speculative grin. "You be Ben's big bro, bud?"

Bill, who wore slacks and an open-necked sport shirt, only

nodded, mouth seemingly glued shut.

Dance shook his head and tsk-tsked. "And you seem like *such* a fine fella, to look atcha."

"Let's get to it," Malcolm said briskly. "I've got court."

"Very well," Carole said. She looked at each of us in turn. "As you know, this meeting is totally off the record, per my agreement with Captain Dance."

"You signed off on that?" Malcolm asked Dance.

"Kicking and screaming."

Malcolm looked sour. "All right."

Carole glanced at her notes. "We're here today because my clients have some information about a major crime under investigation that they would like to pass on to you."

"We're all ears," Dance said.

"However," Carole went on evenly, "we require an absolute guarantee that they will never be identified as the source of the information." She looked at the A.D.A. and the policeman. "No publicity. No testimony. No nothing."

Malcolm chewed on the inside of his cheek. "We don't generally like to work that way," he said finally.

"Depends on whether we can make the case without your testimony," Dance chimed in.

"No guarantees," Carole said.

"Why don't your clients want

to come forward publicly?" Malcolm fiddled with the blank pages of his pad.

"Personal reasons," Carole answered.

"Like maybe they were, ah, involved in the crime?" Dance asked, eyes hard and cold on me.

"Witness only," Carole said.

"What's the crime?" Malcolm asked.

"We have your assurance then?" Carole made a note.

"No, uh-uh." Dance scowled and leaned back in his chair and folded his thick arms across his chest. "You want the goodies, you got to prime the pump a little bit. C'mon, we're easy. And this meeting's off the record."

"No way, sorry," Carole said easily.

"How about a hint?" Malcolm said.

Dance measured with thumb and forefinger. "Just a teeny one."

"Dynamite Park," I said.

The temperature plunged in the small stuffy room. Bill's face was like red slate and I could almost feel the adrenaline percolating in him. The cop and the A.D.A. had gone blank-faced and motionless. Carole gave me a frosty look. "I thought I was handling this."

I glared back at her, keeping up my part of the act. "You

were leading us nowhere but around in circles."

"You saw the Borgia hit," Malcolm said.

Carole gave me one more nasty look, then rubbed her fine jaw with her knuckles. "Gentlemen, we're not alleging direct witness. We're suggesting that we may be able to furnish you with fresh avenues of investigation."

Dance leaned forward, made fists, and banged them together gently as he talked. "You seen the papers. We got nothing on that job. Stone nothin'. What we got is heat. The mayor's office, the union, the churches, the print people, the TV spray-can commandos. If you got information, you'd better—"

Carole's smile was shrewd and frosty. "Given the pressure, I'd think you'd be amenable to some off-the-record direction."

"An arrest is one thing," Malcolm said. "A conviction's another. We've got to go the distance on this thing."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" Carole sighed. "I'm not accustomed to an all-or-nothing attitude in negotiations. Surely you have *some* flexibility."

"Not on this one," Dance growled.

"One other thing." Wes Malcolm eyed me and Bill in turn. "There's civic duty. You ever think of that?"

"Don't waste your breath,"

Dance said. "Perkins's in business for himself."

"We resent that," Carole said mildly. "They've come forward, to this extent anyway. The decision is yours."

"They ain't come forward. They're just standing on the dock, watching," Dance said meaningfully.

"No." Carole waved a finger. "You're on the dock. We're on the ship. And the ship's leaving. Wave bye-bye, gentlemen." She rose, stuffed her pad into her attaché case, and headed for the door.

Bill and I were on our feet and following when Dance said to Malcolm, "Whaddya say we just lock 'em up as material witnesses?"

We froze. Carole turned back from the door. "Goody! Oh, goody!" Her smile had pure joy in it, but her eyes were thin and fierce. "Just go right ahead! My schedule's light this week, I'd like nothing better than to—"

Dance raised a hand and sighed. "Just speculating, counselor."

"Sure." She looked almost disappointed. We followed her out into the hall and down the stairs, passing uniforms and detectives, witnesses and suspects, practitioners of the world's only true twenty-four-hour business. "Well, we tried, guys," she said as we hit the Beaubien sidewalk.

Bill and I sat in my Mustang at the curb, about a block up from his house in Westland.

"Cost me half a sick day," Bill said, "and got us nothing."

Bill's the type of guy who hoards his paid sick days like a miser. It's like getting a whole extra paycheck at the end of the year. I looked at him from above my smoldering cigar. "You absolutely can't tell Marybeth about this, huh?"

"That's out. I told you already."

"So you had a little action. Big deal. Marybeth's a grownup. She'll understand—"

Bill glared at me. "Stuff a rag in it, Benjy!"

"Don't talk like Daddy to me," I shot back.

"I didn't have any action!"

"Whatever," I said after a pause, "if you tell her about it, then the heat's off, you can go back to the cops and come clean."

Bill ignored that, just stared out the passenger window, no doubt auditing the condition of his neighbors' lawns. "What about sending the cops the information anonymously?"

"Nah. They get truckloads of whacko leads like that a day, especially on major jobs like this one. It'll just disappear." Bill said nothing. I knocked cigar ash out the window and went on, "The problem remains. You want to nail the guy

who hit Borgia. But you want to do it quiet."

"Got to be a way," Bill murmured. "Got to."

I shrugged. "Think I'll work it from the other end. Get a make on the shooter and see if any opportunities present themselves."

Bill looked back at me. His face had a funeral pallor to it. "Sounds fishy."

I shrugged. "Generally, fishy's what you go to when you've tried straight and it don't work." Bill sighed. "Time to give me the license number, Bill."

So he did. 01-BYE. I was impressed; I hadn't realized my brother had such a good memory.

The rental car agency's shuttle bus hummed in neutral at the curb in front of the south terminal at Metro Airport. I fell into line amid a group of briefcase-toting businessmen, noisy and festive from many high-altitude drinks. The double doors hissed open and we boarded. I stopped when I reached the driver. "Hi, Annie."

She was a tall, round, bouncy blonde, dapper in her snug uniform. Her eyes danced conspiratorially when she saw me. "Hi, there."

I stood with my back to her to allow additional passengers to pass.

"Any luck?" I said without looking at her.

"No problem," she answered casually. A piece of paper poked my hand and I stuffed it into my pocket. The last passenger was just coming aboard. "Thanks, kid, I owe you one," I said.

"Any time, Ben." As I started back down the steps, Annie said, "You owe me a round later on."

I turned at the curb. "You got it. We'll see about when, though. I'm pretty busy, got some business to take care of."

She smiled and waved. The doors hissed shut, and through the heavily tinted glass I got a glimpse of Annie turning the big steering wheel as the bus, engine growling, pulled away from the curb.

As I sauntered along the sidewalk toward the short-term parking lot, I unfolded the paper Annie had given me. It bore but four lines in laborious black ballpoint:

01-BYE

Allan M. Marco

1551 Telegraph Rd, Ste 20,
Pontiac

A U-Haul rental office.

I doubled back on Telegraph and checked the paper once more, though its words were engraved on my mind. Fifteen-fifty-one, yeah. I looked back at

the sprawling brick building. Fifteen-fifty-one, all right. U-Haul Moving and Storage. So what the hell was "Suite 20?"

I sighed, cranked the wheel over, and whipped into the parking lot just ahead of a pack of oncoming traffic. Have to check it out. Lots of things in detective work make no sense, but you have to go where the information takes you.

One thing was for sure, though. If Annie had screwed up the address, she could forget her free round of drinks.

I wedged my Mustang into a parking spot and sauntered into the business office. Part of it was a display room, with all kinds of empty packing cartons stacked around as well as various other supplies. A high-topped counter ran along the back. Two men in red shirts lounged behind the counter, chatting quietly beneath big signs that listed rental rates for trucks and trailers and other stuff. They were both dark-haired, blue-eyed, ruggedly built. They could have been twins. As I approached, one of them put on his public face and asked, "Help you, sir?"

"Al here?"

They glanced at each other. "Nobody named Al here," the man answered.

"Allan Marco."

The man shook his head, honestly puzzled.

I frowned and squinted at my paper. "Address I was given was 1551 Telegraph, Suite 20, Pontiac."

The man's face cleared as he nodded slowly. "Oh, okay. That's one of our mailboxes."

I blinked. "How's that again?"

The man pointed to the wall on my left. There stood a big steel unit on wheels, containing a couple of dozen little lock-boxes with numbers on their doors. "We rent those mailboxes to people," the man said.

"Like the post office, huh?"

"Yeah," his twin said. "We're competing with the post office. Heh-heh."

Well, well, well. You learn something new every day. I gave the men my best, most honest, most open and innocent face—I'm just a working stiff like you, boys, no threat to anybody, no sir. "I need to find this guy Marco. Got some important business with him."

"Uh-huh."

"So, you got an address or phone number or anything?"

"We do," came the answer, "but we can't give it out."

"Come on, what the hell."

"Listen." The man leaned forward on the counter, face earnest. "The whole reason people rent these things is to be anonymous. We go giving out their addresses, we got no business. You understand that."

"Huh. Probably all kinds of

shady traffic going through there, day by day."

"Maybe," he nodded. "But that's not our business. Our business is collecting the seven bucks each and every month."

"This really puts me in a jam."

"Wish I could help. Just doing my job here."

This was one of those times when you can go one of two ways. Way A: walk off anonymously, try something else. Way B: come on hardnose. You have but an instant to make the decision and it's mostly instinct. Hardnose has its intrinsic appeal, but the downside is that if it doesn't work you've called attention to yourself. If you bitch up Way B, you can't go back to Way A.

I went with Way A, mostly because for once I had a fall-back plan. I thanked the twins, waved, and went back to the Mustang.

Fired up the motor and rolled over to Telegraph Road.

Waited for my chance, and crossed to the apartment complex on the other side.

Found a parking space facing the road. Got out of the car, opened the trunk, sifted through the junk, located the binoculars and a fresh pack of cigars, re-seated myself behind the wheel, and made myself comfortable.

The binoculars took some time to get focused. They were an old

pair of seven by fifties, battered and scratched and nearly impossible to focus thanks to the time a young lady, name unspecified, used them as a projectile during a disagreement but hit a wall instead of my head.

I peered through them and twiddled with the knob, bringing the front plate glass window of the U-Haul place into focus as best I could. Box 20, I'd established while inside, was the left-hand one on the bottom row. I got a good look at it, lowered the glasses, squinted a few times to bring my normal vision back, lighted a cigar, and sat back to wait.

He didn't show up till nine thirty.

When the U-Haul place closed, the twins pushed the mailbox assembly over into the small lobby of the place and then locked the interior doors. This afforded patrons access to the boxes on a twenty-four hour basis. Nice of them, I thought.

Several visitors had called to collect their mail. Each time I raised the binoculars, focused the cockeyed lenses, and watched carefully. None of them went into Box 20.

Till the fourth visitor, that is.

He was a slender man, young-looking at this distance, dressed in tight blue slacks and sleeve-

less, crisp white T-shirt. He parked a shiny white T-Bird at the door and, leaving the engine running, trotted inside. Used a key on Box 20—I could see it clearly through the glasses—fetched out some envelopes, then went back to the car and gunned over to Telegraph Road.

I gave a big sigh of relief as I fired up the Mustang. Not because I'd really learned anything, but because I was going back into action again. If there's anything worse than going without food and bathroom and diversion for hours on end, it's sitting there feeling hungry and floating and bored.

He swung southbound and took the center lane. I allowed him a quarter mile and pulled out, shifting up fast, closing the distance. When I had him wired in, I slowed up and maintained the interval. Must live around here, I thought. Can't be too long a drive now.

An hour later, via I-696, I-275, Route 14, and U. S. 23, we ended up in Ann Arbor.

Hill Street marks the southern boundary of the University of Michigan's main campus. Maybe you remember Hill Street from the mid-sixties, when it was the center of radical protest activity. Fake bomb craters, helmeted riot police, gangs of chanting tie-dyed

longhairs and all that. Well, by now yuppiedom had taken over in a big way, and Hill Street was, in addition to housing its traditional Greek houses, home to an array of upscale clothing shops, record stores, restaurants, video outlets, and tanning salons, all catering to students with access to more money than was good for them.

Including a saloon called Hill Street Booze.

The T-Bird parked around back by a row of dumpsters. I snatched a curb space a half block up and shut off the engine and waited, then followed the man inside.

The atmosphere was totally 1980's remodeled: lots of glossy wood, stained glass, polished brass, and ferns. A dance floor sat off to the left, occupied by a mass of convulsing bodies, presided over by a disk jockey inside a glassed-in booth. Big screen TV showed the Detroit Tigers fighting Toronto for last place, but—not that it was important—I couldn't hear the play-by-play for the Van Hagar booming with thousand-watt power from stacked speakers in the corners. The drinkers did business at dozens of tiny tables positioned at various levels surrounding the dance floor and the bar island, served by fleet-footed, hard-nosed waitresses in frilly skirts that left little to the imagination.

My guy walked past the bar island and was swallowed up by the dance floor madness. I started up a set of steps to a higher level, trying to keep an eye on him in the smoky dimness, but was distracted by a young woman in cutoff bibs who took my arm and hollered into my face, "Why haven't you called me, you son of a bitch?"

I shook my arm loose. "Wrong guy, kiddo."

"The hell, Dave. I'm Angie, remember? Ann Arbor Inn, three weeks ago it was. We met at the pool."

She'd grabbed my arm again and I almost had to break her knuckles to get loose. Staring hard over her shoulder at the other end of the bar, I said tersely, "Never been to Ann Arbor Inn. Or here either, for that matter."

"You said you'd call me!" she screamed. "The next morning. You said so, you *said* so, you SAID SO!"

I pushed her to one side as gently as I could and squinted toward the far end of the bar. My guy had found himself a table for two, a table already occupied by another man. I stared.

Angie took my arm and inserted her fingers into the cuff, caressing my wrist. "I'm quick to forgive, Dave," she said.

I got a good look at my guy's companion and recognition hit like a sledgehammer. I dollied

back against the railing, dragging Angie with me, and looked the other way.

She leaned close to me, smelling of tobacco and sweat. "Ever been to the Corpus Christi on South Ashley? They've always got room. Closed-circuit movies and water beds, too."

Shows what a riotous sense of humor the good Lord has. On any other night, with nothing else to do, I'd have reread the old story with Angie: good laughs, fine time, then walk away clean.

But not tonight.

Not with Ezra Goforth sitting on the other side of Hill Street Booze from me, across a table from the man I'd followed from Pontiac, the man who owned Box 20 at the U-Haul place, the man who rented the car with plate number 01-BYE, the man my brother saw kill Jerry Bor-gia.

I gave Angie my regrets and headed toward the exit. Van Haggard had given way to Mike & The Mechanics, but even so I heard Angie yelling words that would, as Jackie De-Shannon put it in the old song, have made a crow blush.

The Huron Township Cemetery is at the end of a narrow spit of gravel road buried in the middle of Willow Metropark near Flat Rock. I got lost twice trying to

find it, and had to lift a gate to get there, but fortunately Carlo Infante was waiting for me, as agreed.

He reclined on the hood of a big boat of a white Lincoln Continental, leaning back against the heavily tinted windshield, catching some late afternoon rays. As always, he was immaculate: close-cropped dark brown hair, fresh shave, cream colored dress shirt open to the third button, newly pressed cocoa colored slacks, ankle length boots glistening with polish. As I got out of the Mustang, he sat up and slid gracefully off the hood and leaned against the fender. He'd have made a great cheesecake shot for *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, but wouldn't have appreciated the suggestion. Carlo worked for the Detroit organization—a finance guy and computer whiz, just another thirtyish career man—and guys who work for the organization prefer not to be photographed.

The small cemetery stretched green and empty up a glassy slope, topped by immense oaks that cast deepening shadows over the old stones. I gestured at the vista. "Nice quiet place, Carlo."

"Pretty dead," Carlo agreed.

"Heh-heh, yeah. 'Preciate your meeting me." I shook out a cigar and lighted it.

Carlo dug a pack of True out of his pocket, along with a Bic

lighter, but he simply held the items in his hands. He always carried smokes but I'd never seen him use one. "What's up, Ben?"

"Nothing much," I puffed. "Just got a wee bit going on, thought maybe you could share your considerable knowledge of local outlaws to my advantage."

"In other words," Carlo said, "you're stuck tight in a dead end and you're hoping I got some answers."

"Pretty close."

I helped Carlo out of a bad jam once, a long time ago. In return, he'd helped me off and on over the years, and I suppose if we ever did a reckoning we'd mutually agree that his debt was discharged. But he'd gotten in the habit of being what you might call my organized crime rabbi. I think he liked it. I made him feel like a bigshot. And I never asked for more than information, never put him on the spot, never jeopardized him.

He fiddled with the cigarette pack. "What's the bit?"

I sniffed and yawned. "Friend of mine saw Borgia get whacked over in Dynamite Park."

Carlo displayed no sign of excitement. "Yeah, so?"

"Saw the shooter. Problem is, the shooter apparently made him, too. Hasn't done anything about it but hang around, sending the obvious message. Mak-

ing my friend real nervous."

"I can imagine." Carlo watched me intently. "Where do you figure in this?"

"My friend's looking to get off the hook. Told me what he knew. He saw the car the shooter drove and remembered the plate. It was a rental. I backtracked the situation to a maildrop in Pontiac, picked up the perp, ran him to ground in Ann Arbor, a saloon called Hill Street Booze, saw him hoisting glasses with a very old friend of yours."

"Yeah, who?" Carlo asked guardedly.

"Ezra Goforth."

Carlo straightened slowly and folded his arms across his chest, which for him was a monumental display of emotion. "Ezra's no friend of ours. You know that goddamned well."

"Sure I know. Ezra runs the Pontiac organization. Your outfit and his ain't exactly on the best of terms."

"We've agreed to disagree," Carlo said dryly. He gnawed his lip and nodded. "So Ezra did for Borgia, huh," he mused.

"Sure do look that way. But big deal, I say. What I'm trying to do is get a make on the shooter, thought you could check through your mental mug books for me."

"Describe him."

I did so.

Carlo shook his head. "Rings

no bells. Hell, Ben, could be a freelance."

"Then what's he doing still hanging around here?"

"Just guessing. Maybe he's a fresh arm called up from the farm club for this one, now he's got his own spot in the rotation."

"Now that could be." I made a big balloon of uninhaled cigar smoke and watched it travel with mystical slowness across the still air toward the cemetery. "I need to hang a name and an address on the face, Carlo. Could you check around for me?"

"I'll inquire," Carlo said indifferently. "So who's the 'friend' who saw the hit, Ben?"

"Nobody important."

"Whatever you say. Just thought I'd mention that the cops'd cheerfully kill for an eyewitness. Their feet are to the stove on this one."

"Tell me about it."

"Uh-huh." Carlo shook a cigarette out of his pack. I thought I was finally going to see him light up, but he just slid the cigarette back away again. "What a riot. Cops got an army of pros on the street tripping all over themselves, and little old you makes the plate and tracks it to a maildrop."

"Yeah. A U-Haul place up in Pontiac, they rent mailboxes. How's that for maximum cuteness?"

"Actually pretty clever, when you think about it." Carlo put his cigarettes away. "Listen, I'll do some checking and get back to you if I turn up anything live. Okay?"

"Gotcha. Thanks." I started for my Mustang, then turned back. "This is important, Carlo. I mean it."

He was already behind the Connie's wheel. He looked at me through the open passenger-side window, face expressionless. "I know."

The phone sounded from a hundred miles away and gained on me like a freight train. I fell up from unconsciousness and pried my eyes open. The orange numerals of the digital clock showed one twelve. I waved blindly at the lamp, found it without knocking it over, and switched it on. The indistinct shape under the sheet next to me did not budge. I grabbed the jangling phone, dropped the receiver on the floor, hoisted it back by the cord, and got it to my ear. "Yeah okay, what."

"Ben. Carlo." Faraway voice, indistinct.

I cleared my throat. "Yeah. Oh. Carlo?" Weird. Carlo had never called me at home before. He never called anybody.

"Look," he said, almost in a whisper, "I don't know how to tell you this."

"Try plain English."

"But I owe you. You've helped me. You got a right to know."

"C'mon. What is it."

"Anybody finds out I told you this, I'm history, Ben."

By now I was a hundred percent awake. I rubbed my gritty, sore eyes. "Spill it, Carlo. It's safe. You know I majored in clam."

His breathing was audible in my ear. "Our people tried for the shooter tonight. And they missed."

"They did *what*?"

He ignored me and charged on. "They staked out that U-Haul in Pontiac and waited and when he showed up they made him on the spot. Victor Vining. Nickel and dime knee specialist out of Saginaw, he wandered south a year or two ago and hitched up with Goforth's operation, picking up busy work here and there. Small-timer, not a specialist in the wet stuff. How he drew the Borgia assignment I'll never know, he's not that good, and it showed; if he'd been any good your friend would never have made his license plate—"

"Get to it, Carlo," I said tightly.

Pause. "Our people tracked Vining to his place in Brighton. Wired his car. Routine. What they didn't figure on was Vining had a girlfriend. She came out tonight, probably to buy a

pack of cigarettes or a quart of milk or something—got in the car, turned the ignition—*ker-BLOOey*.”

Bad as this was, my mind was working on something else. “But why in the hell did you guys want to waste Vining?”

Carlo cleared his throat again. “To pay him back for Borgia.”

“Why did you care?”

“Borgia was ours.”

My mind flashed through the newspaper articles, the TV interviews, the editorials: Jerry Borgia, the new wave of the union movement, a man from the ranks, fearless and honest, a champion of the working stiffs. “Yours?”

“Ours. He was a project we worked on for years. Bringing him along, grooming him, building his image, working him into a position of real power. But he was ours. We owned him, body and soul. A lot of big plans went down the toilet when Vining wasted him.”

Figured.

“But here’s the thing,” Carl said. “If, like you say, Vining knows you saw him do Borgia, he’s gonna figure you ratted him out for the car bomb job. And he’ll be coming after you.”

“Me?” I asked absently.

Carlo snorted humorlessly. “Don’t give me that tired old ‘friend’ routine. *You* were the witness.”

“Not me, pal.” No harm in telling him. “My brother.”

A long, long pause, then Carlo sighed. “Jesus Christ.”

“Yeah, real sweet, Carlo, this whole thing is.”

“Look,” he said with renewed urgency, “I’m serious about Vining. He may be stupid, but he’s a maniac. All he’s going to think about is paying somebody back for the bomb job. He’ll dive for cover, he’ll disappear, and he won’t come after us, he’ll take the easy way out and go after your brother.”

“Makes sense.”

“Look, Ben, what can I say. I’m sorry.”

There were a million questions I could ask him. Starting with, why didn’t he tell me about his organization’s ownership of Borgia to begin with. But I didn’t. It would have been pointless. Carlo Infante was good for the occasional bit of inside information, but I could never expect loyalty from him. He was not a friend, he was a businessman, and the organization’s interests would always come first.

And the ugly truth of the matter was that if the bomb job on Vining had succeeded, Bill would have been off the hook completely. Free and clear, courtesy of the mob.

When I didn’t answer, Infante said finally, “Look, we

still want Vining. Maybe I could swing having a watch put on your brother. To protect him and get Vining, too."

"No," I said. "He's my brother. I'll take care of it."

"Then you'll end up killing Vining. You'll have to whack him out, Ben."

"There's that possibility."

"Unless he kills you first."

"There's *that* possibility, as well."

Carlo cleared his throat. "Just keep in mind one thing. Like I said, Vining's no techie. No science to his work at all. He don't go for the long-distance stuff, scopes or bombs or stuff like that. He wants somebody, he walks right up to 'em and bim-BAM! Like that. Word is he enjoys it. Likes to spend time with them before he does them. Up close and personal, like the man says."

"Uh-huh," I grunted.

Long pause. "Take care." He hung up.

I stood, stretched, dressed in jeans, boots, and a sport shirt. Then I retrieved my .45 automatic from the top shelf of the closet, checked it out, loaded it, and stuck it in the waistband of my jeans against my spine, under the loose shirttail.

I was just leaving the bedroom when Annie's voice came from the bed. "Where are you going?"

"Got some business, babe," I answered, and left.

Bill's face was unreadable, his voice toneless. "Screwed up again, huh Benjy."

"Look, I didn't know they were going to try to hit him. I didn't even know about the connection between Borgia and the Detroit organization people."

Shift change was just about over. Rows of cars belonging to midnight men had replaced those of departing afternoon people. Lights on endless rows of stanchions poked at the night, painting the parking lot with shadows. A base level of steady noise, emanating from Ford's Michigan Truck plant from the one way and the Wayne Assembly Plant from the other, rumbled in the air almost subliminally, punctuated by the periodic roar of diesel car carriers from Michigan Avenue.

Bill's bald head gleamed dully in the half light as he leaned against the side of his brilliant red Mercury two-door brougham, face averted from me. When he spoke again, his voice was a low angry mutter. "First you drag me down to the police station. 'This'll take care of everything, Bill,' you says. But it doesn't. Then you cook up this stunt with those mob greaseballs. And that goes sour.

And now you think this Vining is going to come after me."

"Seems safest to assume that," I said.

"Seems to me," Bill said, voice rising, "you've sicced him on me. You've waved a red flag right in the mad dog's face. Thanks a whole hell of a bunch."

I felt my pulse hardening, but at the same time I realized: he's scared. Big Brother Bill is scared spitless. "Look," I said calmly, "I want to ride shotgun with you for a few days. Close but out of sight. He makes a move, then we can—"

Bill stood and started around the rear of his Mercury. "Nope," he said definitely, "I'll take care of it."

"Yeah, how? You gonna rat him out to the cops?"

Bill opened the driver's door and tossed his lunchbox inside. "No. But I'll do something. I can take care of myself."

"This thing's out of your league, Bill, totally."

Bill glared at me. "My league? How about yours? You screwed it up twice. You're out of it. Get lost and stay there, Ben."

"Look, at least send Marybeth somewhere."

"Already did that. She's in Jackson with her sister." Bill dropped into his Mercury, fired it up, backed out of the stall, and screeched away.

I knew where he was going,

so there was no point in rushing. I drove my Mustang up Michigan Avenue, then north on Newburgh into Westland. By the time I rolled past Bill's ranch house, the automatic garage door was easing down, closing the Mercury in.

I parked across the street and up a couple of doors and watched the lights go on in Bill's house, then wink out one by one.

The street was silent and practically dark. Good thinking atmosphere, and I had plenty to think about.

Regardless of Bill's wishes, I just could not walk away and leave this alone. For Vining to up and run away was just too good to be true. I didn't know the man, but I knew his type, and a sick gnawing in my gut told me that Vining would come after Bill. Sooner or later, but most likely sooner.

It would have helped if Bill had agreed to work with me. Protecting him was going to be much more difficult at a distance. But I didn't think it was impossible. Maybe that's a characteristic of a private detective, ego or something: you don't think there's anything you can't fix, if you're just persistent enough or lucky enough or tough enough.

But even if I'd wanted to, I couldn't take a pass on this one. It wasn't one of those arm's-length jobs, like a missing per-

son case, or bad debt collection. It was my brother's life.

During the first twenty-four hours of following Bill around, I learned a lot, and I pretty much figured out where Vining would make his move.

My brother Bill is an extremely methodical man whose daily life is built of a series of almost unbreakable rituals. You can almost set your watch by his activities and his movements. Normally this would make him vulnerable—unpredictability is a good survival strategy, no matter what line of work you're in. But Bill's daily routine exposed him to far less danger than I would have guessed.

Take his home. It's on a half acre lot in a well-treed suburb, surrounded by trees and a chain link fence and lots of other homes that are buzzing with activity throughout the daylight hours. To take a shot at him, say from a passing car, would require tremendous audacity and a virtually terminal desire to go to prison. Too many witnesses. Vining would almost certainly not try it that way.

As for Bill's house, I happen to know that he has an electronic security alarm system which he activates every night. Stickers announcing its presence are on every window and

door, plus if you look carefully you can see the sensor tape on the windows. So that pretty much ruled out Vining jimmying a window at night and doing the deed that way.

When Bill wasn't at home, you could pretty much figure that he was at work; Bill doesn't play golf or go to ball games or play poker or stroll around the neighborhood or loaf on beaches. And it would be hard to reach him at work, too. You have to have a pass to enter the parking lot and to enter the plant itself. At shift change Bill was surrounded by hundreds of other people. Too many witnesses. Vining wouldn't try for him there, either.

The key thing was what Carlo had told me. Vining didn't do his work long-distance. He liked it up close and personal. And the only place he'd be able to engineer something like that was on the road.

Somewhere.

I hadn't worked for Ford's myself for twenty-some years, but I still had an employee pass, thanks to my old union cronies. I used it to enter the plant parking lot the night after my conversation with Bill, a half hour or so before his shift let out. I was on foot. I wouldn't be needing a car, not for a while anyway.

The security guard waved me

through the gate. I sauntered toward the enormous factory, chilled by the night air, listening to the distant, unceasing noise of manufacturing, keeping an eye out for observers. About four rows of cars in from the gate, I swung left and down one of the aisles. Bill's car was right where he always parked it, fourth row in, fifteen cars down, backed into the stall, gleaming clean. I went to the rear and glanced around again. No observers. Applying a skeleton key to the lock, I swung the trunk lid up. The interior was predictably uncluttered, virtually spotless, and plenty roomy. I slid backward over the lip of the trunk and flopped down on my back, then reached up and pulled the lid shut, closing myself in impenetrable darkness. I squirmed around, adjusting my legs, getting as comfortable as I could, which wasn't very. My .45 automatic was biting my back, so I pulled it out and shoved it into my waistband in front on the left side, then lay back to wait. Though there was nothing to see, I kept my eyes open. Last thing I needed was to doze off.

A half century of a quarter hour later, I heard noises from the front of the car, a door opening. The car oonched down slightly on the driver's side, a door closed, the engine came alive, and we began to move.

Aside from engine and tire and occasional truck sounds from outside, I heard nothing. As I lay there, I amused myself with the possibility of Bill's having a flat, stopping the car, and opening the trunk to see his brother do a jack-in-the-box act. Somehow I didn't think he'd be amused. And I wasn't having a barrel of laughs myself. It got very hot and stuffy in there, and after a few minutes the muscles of my twisted legs started to bind up on me.

Fortunately the ride lasted only fifteen minutes or so. After a slowdown, a tight turn, and a pause, we came to rest. From the echoing of the engine I assumed we were in Bill's garage. The engine shut off, I heard the faint growl of the garage door motor, the car door opened and shut again, and a minute or two later all was silent.

I extracted an old metal fingernail file from my shirt pocket, groped it to and into the trunk latch mechanism, and after a sweaty ten seconds activated it and swung the lid up. I got to my knees and climbed out clumsily, wincing as feeling returned to my half-numb legs. After lowering and latching the lid with just the faintest of clicks, I got my bearings from the dim streetlight shining through the windows and made my way to the back door.

No one was outside. I heard

nothing from the house. Bill was probably taking a shower or something and wouldn't activate the alarm system till he was ready for bed. I slipped out the door and trotted down Bill's pristine, golf-green lawn to the rear of the property. There Bill has stacked in excess of twenty cords of split firewood—just waiting for civilization in the form of Michigan Consolidated Gas to fold up, I guess—and I navigated my way among these to the fence, hopped it, and strolled between a pair of ranch houses to the street, where I found my '71 Mustang parked right where I'd left it.

And headed for home. False dawn limned the horizon. Bill's work day was over, and mine was just beginning.

I returned to Bill's house close to sundown, coming off eight hours working the counter of a Romulus auto parts store whose owner suspected his employees of till-tapping. Having failed to spot any criminal acts, I felt frustrated. Having spent eight hours on my feet, dealing with a steady stream of obnoxious customers, I was tired and testy.

So I arrived at the street back of Bill's house considerably less enchanted with my bright idea than I'd been the day before. For all I know, I thought, Vining's in Vegas or A.C., tum-

bling dice or splitting queens at a thousand-buck table, one hand around a buxom bimbo and the other holding a rocks glass, the last thing on his mind being one William Perkins of Westland, Michigan, witness to the audacious open-air execution of a seemingly incorruptible union executive in Dynamite Park, Detroit.

If something like that *is* the case, I thought as I hoofed casually between the ranch houses toward the rear of Bill's property, then I'm spending a lot of time riding around in a car trunk for absolutely nothing.

I crept up to the chain link fence at the rear of Bill's lot. I thought about having a hot spicy meal at Guido's in Taylor, followed by an evening of brewskis, banter, and brotherhood at Under New Management. But, as entrancing as the thoughts were, I kept them in reserve for later. Much later. Give it a couple, three more days, I thought. Make damn sure.

Bill's back yard was deep, beginning with his lumberyard and continuing up a slight grade of painted-on lawn to his white-brick single-story house. I saw no one, but I heard the roar of a lawn mower from the front, and after a moment of waiting I saw my brother at the side, industriously pushing his red Toro rear-bagger. As usual, he

was stripped to the waist, brawny shoulders and hairy chest damp with sweat; below he wore dark twill pants and boondockers. When he was out of sight again, I vaulted the fence, threaded my way through the woodpiles, and trotted up the grade toward the garage. I had no fear of Bill's appearing any time soon. He doesn't mow this lawn the way normal people do; he does it twice, once vertically and once horizontally, and till late fall he does it at least twice a week.

The side door to the garage was unlocked. I let myself in, shut the door behind me, slipped over to the red Mercury brougham, and opened the trunk with my skeleton key. The big trunk bed yawned clean in front of me. I had one more moment of doubt: do I really want to go through this? But I swung my leg over into the trunk, lay back clumsily, and pulled the lid down atop me.

Ten minutes of stuffy blackness later, I heard noise. A faint door closing, then the car vibrated as Bill got in. Growl of garage door motor, well-tuned hum of Mercury engine, and we began to move.

We were on our way to Ford's. From having watched Bill the past two nights, I knew his routine. I was sure it never varied. He drove up Palmer to Wayne Road, and then south to a drive-

through beer/pop place called Inn and Out, and traded in the previous day's empty diet Pepsi 16-ounce for a full one. I lay as still as I could, trying to ignore the stiffness beginning to invade my legs. If my half-assed theory was correct, we could be getting close now.

The car slowed, turned, then turned again and stopped. I heard a faint echo in the distance; we were inside someplace, undoubtedly Inn and Out. Muffled voices, then we edged forward. The echoing disappeared. The car slowed a bit, then stopped with a jerk that snapped my head hard against the trunk overhead.

I heard metallic noises to my right. A sag of suspension. Unintelligible voice, just one, hard and insistent. The car moved ahead. Sharply, this time. Unlike Bill's normal driving. I went to my waistband and pulled out the .45 with a slick hand. I couldn't see a thing and hadn't heard much, but I knew there were two people up front now. Bill was probably still driving, but under the direction of another, now.

And we rode, and rode, and rode.

All the while I lay there helpless, feeling my body begin to bind up and turn numb from the waist down. This is it, this is it,

I thought; what now? I couldn't get out as long as the car was moving, but there wasn't a hell of a lot I could do till I *could* get out. I toyed with the idea of taking a blind shot straight up the car on the passenger-seat side, take out Vining that way. But it was too risky for a lot of reasons. Number one, I wasn't absolutely positive Vining was on the passenger side. Number two, I wasn't positive of the location of the Mercury's gas tank. Used to be they were always directly below the trunk, but a few years back some carmakers began putting them above the axle behind the back seat, and if that was the case with Bill's car, one shot would blow us all to hell.

So I lay there and waited. It got very close and hot and stuffy there in the trunk. I heard nothing from up front. I could picture the scene, though. Bill hunched behind the wheel, Vining to his right, holding a weapon on him, giving him terse directions; Bill driving dutifully, despite the inherent absurdity of being told to drive at gunpoint, buying himself life a minute at a time.

Finally we slowed. Went through a series of turns. Hit some rough pavement at crawling speed, then slowed and stopped. The engine echoed briefly and an electric motor growled from outside, then went

silent. We were in a garage, somewhere.

Now I could hear things pretty well. An unfamiliar male voice said flatly, "Out."

Doors clicked and opened; the car shook gently. I laid my automatic on the trunk floor and fished the fingernail file out of my pocket and inserted it into the trunk latch mechanism. But I didn't activate it, not just yet.

Vining's voice was cold, yet perversely amiable. "Just stand right there, buddy."

Bill: "You killed Gale, didn't you."

"Sure I did," Vining answered. "Had to. Eyes too big for her own good. But first she told me about you. Thought she could buy back her life by squealing on you."

Bill said something unintelligible. I thought: good a time as any. I pressed hard on the fingernail file to release the trunk latch.

Nothing happened.

Sweat popped on my forehead as I worked the latch feverishly, trying to find purchase. Vining continued to speak outside. "But I did her real quick and clean. Got her neck in the crook of my arm and gave a twist. Popped her neck in two places. She didn't feel a thing. . . . I don't believe in making people suffer. For you I got a bullet in the eye. Just like throwing a switch."

Bill said, voice dry and cracked, "I won't ever talk. I swear to you. I promise."

Vining laughed. "You know, I mostly believe you. You seem kind of like a numb-nut nobody, harmless Mr. Joe Six-Pack. Hard to believe, looking at you, you fingered me for that carbomb."

Bill's voice was shaky. "I don't know anything about that."

Vining said, "Too bad for you, I guess."

I gave the fingernail file a savage twist and it snapped in half.

And the trunk lid rose a quarter inch.

Vining apparently didn't notice. "Here goes. Like I said, quick and clean."

I picked up my automatic, shoved the trunk lid up hard, and vaulted over the bumper onto the floor. My numb legs gave out on me, and I damn near fell, grabbing the Mercury bumper just in time. I rose, automatic extended, half blinded by the bright lights.

We were in a large, cluttered auto repair garage. Dust mixed with the stink of rubber and oil in the air. Bill stood by the driver's door, half turned toward me, wearing an open-necked sport shirt, slacks, and an owlsh, disbelieving gape. Beyond him was Victor Vining, standing in the shadow of a fully elevated lift, atop which

sat an old Chevy wagon. I just got a glimpse of Vining, enough to see the .22 revolver in his hand. He grinned and aimed it at me and fired.

The bullet slapped off the upraised trunk lid. I cocked my automatic and jumped to the left as Bill spun and hurtled hell for leather over a row of stacked used tires. From my half-crouch I saw Vining turn and fire several shots in Bill's direction. But the small .22 slugs, as deadly as they can be to a human being, couldn't penetrate the tires. Bill was safe there, for the moment anyhow.

I rose and aimed my automatic with both hands at Vining. He whirled back toward me and we fired at the same time. My slug caught him and threw him back against the wall beyond the lift, sending his .22 spinning to the floor between us.

I lowered my .45 and was fixing to check Bill out when I saw a red stain spreading inexorably across my shoulder. Warm wet ran down my flank under my shirt. My tongue and mouth and throat went dry instantly and I felt light-headed. I looked down at myself in total disbelief. I'd been shot. The son of a bitch *shot* me.

Suddenly, staying vertical was impossible. I lowered myself to the cement slowly and laid the automatic down care-

fully and watched the blood curiously. It was oozing, not spurting; must have caught a vein rather than an artery, I told myself. A noise from across the room made me look up disinterestedly.

Vining wasn't dead. I'd hit him square-on with a .45 automatic and he still wasn't dead. He was on elbows and knees, crawling under the lift, headed for his pistol, which lay on the cement between us. He was panting and grinning and leaving a trail of red behind him, like a snail on an aquarium wall, but he was coming for his gun and I had a pretty good idea what he intended to do with it.

I swallowed and picked up my .45. It weighed close to six hundred pounds. I fumbled with it in my slick hand, trying to get a grip. I looked at Vining through blurry eyes; he was still crawling, making six inches at a time, about a man's length from his gun now.

And a motion from above made me look up.

The big Chevy wagon had moved. Down, just imperceptibly. I stared at it, curiously detached and puzzled. Then I figured it out. Lifts are operated by air pressure. Air pressure is controlled by valves. The valve controls were mounted on the wall. Vining must have hit something back there when I shot him—nudged

a switch or something, damned if I can tell you—and the pressure was leaking out, causing five thousand pounds of Chevrolet iron to start down.

I looked back at Vining. He hadn't noticed a thing, just kept crawling, grin wide and ghastly. I licked my lips and said hoarsely, "Up there. Up there."

He ignored me, just kept crawling, punctuating each lunge with a grunt.

The wagon gained speed, sighing down.

I gathered all my strength and shouted, "Up THERE!"

Vining, just an arm's length from his pistol, froze and glanced up. He let out a scream. I fell forward and buried my face in my arms.

And Vining's scream ended abruptly with a sound I shall never, ever forget.

“**B**enjoy.”
I became aware that the vomiting sounds had ended.

I opened my eyes and stared at my brother, forcing the foggy twilight back from my eyes. Bill was crouched before me, face pasty, eyes hollow. I felt something hard bite into my back; it was the bumper of his Mercury I was leaning against.

I did not look to my right, where the Chevy sat flat on the floor on its lift.

"What," I answered vaguely.

"We gotta get out of here."

"In a while. Let me rest."

Bill's face was a struggle.

"I'm sorry."

"For what."

"I didn't help. I jumped for cover. I ran and hid."

"This ain't your kinda thing, Bill. It's my kinda thing."

"You got shot," Bill said with difficulty.

"Just a scratch. You know us Perkinses, part case-hardened steel, part seasoned horsehide, and part pure meanness."

"Don't talk like Daddy to me."

"On that one subject Daddy was absolutely right." My voice sounded a little crazy, even to me. "They ain't made the bullet yet, et cetera blah blah."

Bill studied me, tight-lipped. "I'm getting you to a hospital."

I cleared my throat. "We do that, the whole thing's blown. Gunshots get reported to the cops."

"I don't care. Not any more."

"Hell no. No hospitals. No doctors. Listen, bro. The bullet went straight through. Nothing to take out. All I need's cleaning and butterfly bandages and a couple of shots and a sling." I licked my lips. "There's Annie. Lives in Brownstown. She was an LPN. She'll have the stuff. Get me there."

Bill nodded. "Okay. You ready?"

"Just a minute. Let me rest

some more." I took some deep breaths. Shock was wearing off and the shoulder was starting to give me hell. I looked at my brother. "One thing you could do."

"What's that?"

"Find a rag or something to put on this before I bleed to death here."

"Yeah yeah, sure," Bill said with fresh urgency. He glanced around the garage but of course spotted nothing, so he began to unbutton his shirt. When his eyes met mine again, his hands froze, then tore at the shirt, popping buttons, ripping seams.

He wadded it into a big thick patch and stuffed it under my shirt, around the shoulder, covering both holes. I bit down hard and locked my throat, and the one time I looked into Bill's eyes I saw that they were moist. I looked away quickly.

Then he helped me into his Mercury and we got the hell out of there.

The steaks were gone, along with the drinks and the sun. Conversation had about worn itself out, despite Marybeth's most earnest efforts. I helped her clear the dishes, then poked my head out the door to the patio, where Bill sat staring out over his pristine lawn. "Guess I'll boogie, bro."

"Okay. See ya, Benjy."

I walked out the front door of the house. Marybeth followed me to the driveway and gave me a tender, gingerly hug, conscious of the sling I wore. "You take care now, Ben."

"Sure, babe." I hugged her with my good arm and gave her a brusque kiss on the cheek. "You be good, hear?"

"Me be good?" She stood back from me, thin face fierce. "You be careful what bars you go into, Ben Perkins."

"Hey, bar can get knocked over any time, kiddo."

"Then try ducking when the shooting starts."

"That's what I was doing. Whaddya think I am, some kind of freakin' hero? I was headed for the floor, but the guy was a lousy shot and drilled my shoulder. Damn if I can help it."

She gave me a set-jawed, narrow-eyed look. "I just don't want to have to stand around while they plant you, you big ugly clown."

"Gawd-damn. Don't choke me up here, okay?"

"Just watch it. Please?" She released my hand, gave me a smile and a wave, and walked toward the porch of their house. I was halfway to my '71 Mustang when Bill caught up with me. "Look," he said, after checking to make sure Marybeth was back in the house and out of earshot, "I wanna thank you, Benjy."

"Call me Ben, okay? I'm grown up now, have been since Johnson beat Goldwater." I went around to the driver's side and got in. Bill squatted down and peered in the passenger side window.

I looked at him. "And you're welcome," I added.

His face taciturn as ever, he asked, "You p.o.'d at me, Benjy?"

I dropped my hands from the wheel and sat back in the bucket seat. "You were doing it with her."

"Who?"

"Gale, idiot," I snarled. "The woman you were with at Dynamite Park when you saw Borgia get whacked."

"She was just a friend."

"You were *doin'* it with her!" I shouted. "Why can't you just come out and admit it, Bill? Why do you have to be the straight-shooting tight-ass brother all the time?"

Bill's face went through some changes, but he did not answer.

I leaned toward him. "All my life you've had this nose in the air, holier than thou, older brother attitude. Like someone died and left you in charge. You know, mostly I can't stand being around you, and that's a natural fact." I ticked fingers. "I never been married. I don't work on the line. I don't own a house. I got girlfriends, and I scuffle and I hustle to make a buck, and I keep a sloppy house

and don't wash my car but two or three times a year. It's in your face all the time, every time I see you, that look, like you're smelling dead fish."

"I don't think poorly of you, Benjy."

"Ben, for Chrissake! Then if you don't think poorly of me, you can try leveling once in a while. Get human, get real. You were doing Gale. You were going to bed with her. You were unfaithful to Marybeth. Right?"

Bill did not answer.

"Sure you were," I said softly. "That license plate number. Of the car Vining was driving. 01-BYE. You remembered it so well. You know and I know why that was."

Bill's face looked drained. "She was dumping me," he whispered. "She was giving me the handshaker. I hardly heard what she said. I just stared ahead and I saw that plate and I couldn't take my eyes off it."

"Yeah," I said, after a pause. "Painful. Like a lot of things.

That's what it's about, bro, haven't you learned that by now? Look, I've done rotten things, and I'll do rotten things again. And *you* have, and you *will*."

Bill licked his lips and took a long breath, face pensive.

"I don't judge you," I said after a pause. "Just don't judge me, and we'll get along fine."

Bill said, "If you think I'm that bad a guy, why the hell did you help me?"

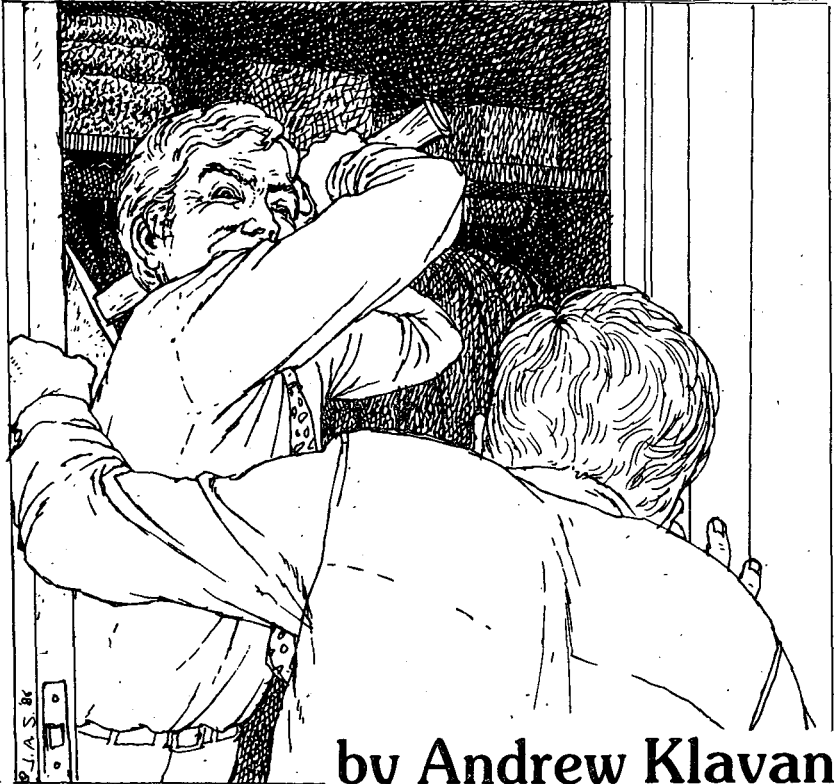
I closed my eyes and shook my head, then looked directly into Bill's face. "Because you're my brother, and I love you."

I fired up the Mustang engine, popped the clutch, and headed up the street, guiding the car with my good hand. The Mustang grabbed rubber as I shifted into second, and I glanced into the rear view mirror.

Bill was standing on his berm, staring after me.

I looked back at the street. There, I thought. That'll fix him.

The Ghost of Monday



by Andrew Klavan

By Friday, it was gone. Fletcher read the paper on his way home from Wall Street, and there was not a sign of it. The blackout at Grand Central Terminal had replaced it on the front page. Within, it had given way to an anti-import demonstration in the garment district and a drug-

related shootout in the Heights. It amused him. After all his worry, all his wrestlings with the inner angels of conscience and fear, it had not even been news for a week. In the great tidal wave of events, it was a droplet. It had vanished without a trace.

He threw the newspaper away

before he got on the elevator. He rode upstairs with his hands folded in front of him and his eyes trained on the doors. A corner of his mouth twitched upward: the suggestion of a smile. Other than that, he betrayed nothing.

He loosened his tie as he entered his apartment. He kicked off his shoes as he shut the door. He liked the feel of the shag beneath his stockings. He tossed his briefcase down by the bar and poured himself a drink.

He drank standing by the window, looking down on Fifth Avenue. He watched the string of green traffic lights running away into the crystal darkness. He watched the cabs' red tail-lights weaving beneath them, and beneath the golden crown atop the Crown Building, and the solemn iron cross atop the red brick steeple of the Presbyterian church, and between all the avenue's towering, concrete walls, which narrowed to the vanishing point.

The tapping annoyed him. This was the third day he had heard it. He knew it was coming from the bathroom and suspected it was in the pipes, but he wanted to make sure before he called a plumber. It was probably a steady thing, but it entered his consciousness now as if it had just begun again after a pause. He flinched and turned toward the noise just in

time to see a flutter of tan skirt disappear around the hall corner.

"What the hell," Fletcher said. He put his drink down on the coffee table. He walked to the hallway.

He called: "Hello?" Then he snorted. "Good, Fletcher, talk to yourself," he said aloud.

Still, he went down the hall. There were three doors down there. The bathroom was to the right, the bedroom to the left, the closet straight ahead. He flicked on the bedroom light, glanced in. Nothing there. Of course there was nothing there. He tried the closet, feeling silly. Finally, he hit the bathroom light, and went in.

The tapping seemed to come from someplace right next to the tub. He couldn't pin it down exactly. It was a steadily repeated rap, muffled, like someone knocking on the door of a neighboring apartment. All the sounds of the building traveled through the bathrooms. You could never tell which apartment they were coming from.

He stood looking down at the tiles beside the tub, he noticed an odd smell. Faint, but thick, swampy. The tapping must be caused by something backing up in the pipes. He thought: Tan skirt. She always did dress well. But blackmail is blackmail, all the same.

The thought was unbidden. He shook it off. He turned to go. But as his eyes crept across the mirror over the sink, he had an odd sensation. It seemed to him for a moment as if his reflection had paused while he turned. Paused to stare at him and smile while he continued to turn away. He wheeled back to it. It was just as it should be. Everything was just as it should be.

Irritated, he grimaced at himself in the glass. He killed the bathroom light and stepped across the hall to the bedroom again.

He decided to get undressed. He'd get into bed, maybe give the Walker papers another onceover. There was not a thing wrong with them, he knew that, but it would put his mind at ease. It was a special trust, after all. The boss had assigned it to him personally. The boss would have handled it himself, in fact, if he hadn't been so distraught about his wife.

He went to the bedroom closet and opened the door. There was a man standing inside, waiting—a man with wild laughter in his eyes and an axe in his hands. The man stepped forward, raising the axe above his head. Fletcher had time to let out one high-pitched shriek, and then the man buried the blade in his brain.

And was gone. He seemed to

pass right through Fletcher. The blade did not bite flesh or smash bone. It simply dissolved on contact and disappeared. Fletcher reeled backward. He sat down hard on the bed. His face sank into his hands. He felt sick at his stomach. The man with the axe: it had been he. It had been Fletcher himself.

Slowly, he looked up, looked around him at the empty room. Had he really had such madness in his eyes? He hadn't felt mad. He had felt very calm, very logical. Remembering the old camping axe like that. He hadn't used it in years.

The tapping began again, louder now. And drifting from the bathroom with it came that rancid smell. He tried not to take it in, but it crawled into his nostrils. It seemed to drip, viscid, down the back of his throat.

He cursed: a small, strangled noise. He stood. His fists clenched, he strode into the bathroom. He paused there in the dark, the smell thick all around him, clogging his senses, the tapping louder, clouding his mind. He held his breath. With an angry sweep of his hand, he snapped on the light.

The tub was filled with blood again.

"Damn!" He growled it now. A single step took him to the tub's edge. He reached down for the chain on the drainage plug.

Her hand rose, dripping, out of the bath and grabbed him. Her fingers wrapped tightly around his wrist. He felt the dampness of them. As he tried to pull free, he saw the diamond on her engagement ring flash in the light. Crazy, he thought: Had she been anyone but the boss's wife. Had she just not threatened to tell.

The strength of the hand was preternatural. It dragged him toward the blood-filled tub. The tapping was like thunder now inside his head. He cried out and pulled free.

The hand sank down, out of sight. The tapping ceased. Only the blood remained. He wanted to close his eyes, to make it vanish. He couldn't. He was afraid.

Instead, he stood staring as the blood began to drain away. It drained slowly, with a soft gurgle. He kept staring as the level sank lower and lower. It was low enough so that nothing could be hidden beneath, but he kept staring. Finally, the last of it spiraled down. The tub was empty. The tub had to be empty. He had seen to it, had scrubbed it thoroughly when he was finished. The hand, the arm—all

the pieces—he had loaded them into the trunk, one by one. It had made him gag to do it, but he had gotten it done. Loaded them into the trunk and thrown the trunk in. . . .

All at once, the tapping returned. It was a pounding now. It was right beside him. He spun around. The trunk had come back. It was sitting on the bathroom floor again. The pounding came from inside it. It grew louder and louder. The top of the trunk began to shudder with the force of it. The top of the trunk began to rise.

Fletcher was babbling as he ran from the apartment. He was laughing as he tore down the firestairs; out into the lobby; out into the night. He was still laughing when the cop found him. He was sitting under a streetlight, hugging his knees and laughing. When the officer leaned toward him to check him out, Fletcher looked up at him and smiled. He crooked his finger at the cop, and the cop leaned closer.

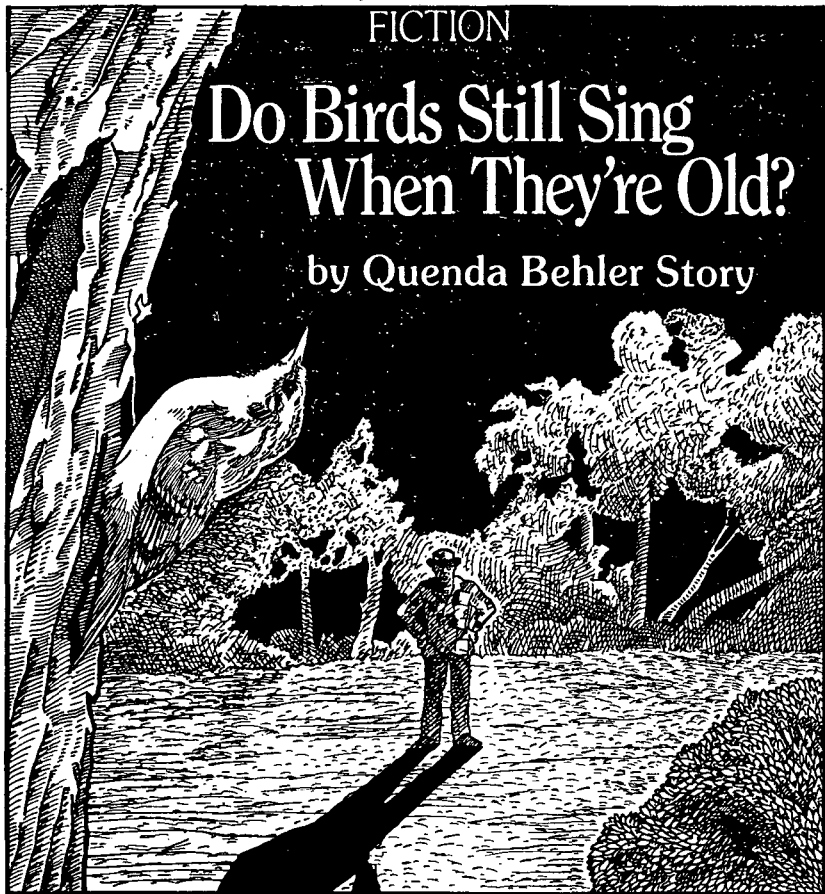
"Nothing vanishes," Fletcher said, giggling. Then he told the whole story.

The cop was spellbound.

FICTION

Do Birds Still Sing When They're Old?

by Quenda Behler Story



It wasn't sunrise yet, but the darkness was beginning to ease, allowing Ed to see the Grey-breasted Creeper clinging to the trunk of the red maple where she'd hidden her nest. She stared suspiciously back at him.

"You've got real problems, bird," he told her. "You're standing between Harry Harte and big bucks, and all you got out here to protect you is me."

His crippled leg throbbed nastily, reminding him that he was a fifty-year-old man on a disability pension, and he ought not to be acting like he thought he was Rambo or somebody. I used to be Rambo, he thought. He had waited like this before: first in Korea in cold so harsh that even if you could curl your fingers around

your weapon, the damn thing would misfire; then in the mushy-hot jungles of 'Nam. Waiting should have been easier here; early spring in Michigan was hardly cold at all by Korean standards, but he couldn't take it like he used to.

He shifted his weight, using his stick as a brace. He'd thrown away the crutch they'd given him at the VA hospital after he found his stick: a piece of black cherrywood that he'd carved and sanded and polished until it felt just right. Janet was still alive then. She hadn't liked his stick. Looks more like a weapon than a cane, she'd told him. Well, she was nearly right. Wasn't as much of a weapon as some things he'd carried, but anyone coming in these woods this morning wouldn't bring much with them either—not to kill a nestful of baby birds.

He'd never heard of Grey-breasted Creepers before Mary McIver had come to his house back up on the hill that overlooked these woods. She had pushed a petition to *Save the Grey-breasted Creeper* at him for his signature, and then she'd drafted his house as headquarters for her gang of birdlovers. Early every morning they would park their cars in his driveway and earnestly march down the path to the woods to hunt for proof that endangered Grey-breasted Creepers nested in the hundred acres where Harry Harte intended to build "Mid-Michigan's hottest new suburb—Songbird Estates!"

The little drops of condensation that clung to the bullgrass and wild flax sprinkled Ed every time he moved, and above his head, the Creeper called with a cracked two-note chirp that sounded like somebody wheezing. If you were cute, he told the Creeper, like the chickadees that came to his yard and ate sunflower seeds off the picnic table, Mary McIver might not have so much trouble saving you.

Later on today there'd be State Resource people and Federal Conservation people crawling all over the place. If they agreed with Mary that an honest-to-God Grey-breasted Creeper was nesting there, they'd freeze Harry Harte's bulldozer in its tracks.

Mary and her friends intended to keep the Creeper's nest location a secret until the federal people could get a look at it, but it had been Ed's experience that a secret a committee knew was real likely not to be a secret at all. He'd lain in bed last night thinking about that—he hadn't had a good night's sleep since Janet had died a year ago—and it struck him how much simpler life would be for the Harte & Holde Real Estate Development Company if there just

wasn't a Creeper nest to see when the federal people showed up to look.

The Creeper cocked her head towards the road some half-mile away. Ed could hear it, too, sounded like a pickup. When the engine shut down, Ed tensed, listening for human sounds through the brush. Lifting his head cautiously, he peered through a spider web stretched across two willow whips. There still wasn't much light, but the figure coming towards him was too broad-shouldered and bandy-legged to be anyone but Bob Mahaga, Harte & Holde's construction superintendent: a much younger man than Ed, with two good legs to Ed's one. Mahaga was carrying climbing spurs, probably not too keen on plain old hand-over-hand up thirty feet of maple trunk. Ed eased himself flat onto the ground and thought about Mahaga. You could hardly blame the man for protecting his livelihood. After all, if the government stopped construction on Songbird Estates on account of one little bird, Bob Mahaga would be out of a job.

The light was coming up faster now, and Ed could see the cross-hatch marks on the Creeper's face, angling away from her eyes and giving her a sad, cynical look. If I were a chickadee, she sneered at Ed, you'd save me.

Ed sighed. Well, he silently answered the little bird, I guess if you're gonna be extinct, it ought not to be because Harte & Holde want to make a buck.

He waited until Bob Mahaga was directly in front of where he lay hidden in the underbrush, and then Ed came up suddenly, swinging his stick like a baseball bat across the front of Bob Mahaga's kneecaps. Mahaga went down heavily and rolled to his back screaming. Ed slammed his knees again. If there was one thing in life that Ed was absolutely sure of, it was that when you were fighting someone younger, bigger, and stronger than you, it didn't pay to hurt him halfway. Mahaga was hurt too, but he was still fighting. He scrambled up, slashing at Ed with the climbing spurs. Ed dodged behind him and brought him down hard again, this time by whopping the back of his knees. Mahaga dropped the spurs, and when he tried to reach for them, Ed stomped hard on his hand, maybe breaking a few bones from the sound of it. Mahaga twisted away and lay gasping for breath as recognition dawned in his eyes. "You crazy old man! Whaddya jump me for? I wasn't doing nothing to you!"

Ed studied him carefully until he was certain he had quit, and

then held out a hand to him. "Come on," he said. "I'll help you get back to your truck."

"I can't drive like this," Bob Mahaga insisted. "You broke my knee."

He couldn't stand up either, and for sure Ed couldn't carry him, so finally Ed helped him get into a sitting position where he could lean against the maple tree that hid the Creeper's nest, and then Ed settled companionably down beside him, taking out his thermos and pouring Mahaga a cup of coffee. "We'll just wait until the government people get here to check on the bird. They'll probably give you a lift to the hospital."

"Your ass will rot in jail for hurting me like this, old man."

Ed didn't have a second cup, so he drank his coffee straight from the thermos. "I doubt it," he said. "I can't see you telling folks how an old gimp like me beat the hell out of you, and anyway," Ed laughed softly, "I bet Harry Harte don't want you to talk about being here at all, considering he's under a court order to stay away until the federal people decide if this is a Creeper nesting place or not."

It was almost eleven when the government people finally did show up, and when they did, there were so many of them, and they had so much equipment, that Ed wondered if they wouldn't wind up scaring the Creeper away from the place themselves. Two of the government men carried Bob Mahaga to the road, then went back to take the Creeper's picture and count its babies, or whatever it was they were doing to it, while Mary McIver drove Bob Mahaga and Ed to the local hospital. Mary didn't have much to say on the way over, so Ed figured she was upset about missing a chance to see the government at work. She left right away, but Ed hung around to make sure Bob Mahaga got home all right when the hospital was through with him. After all, he didn't have anything personal against the man.

Besides, hanging around the hospital was something to do.

Ed had fallen asleep in one of the hospital lobby chairs after a nurse had hauled Mahaga away for his third set of X-rays. He was dreaming about his wife. She had died in this hospital.

He and Janet had moved here after his medical discharge from the Marines and had built a house on land she'd inherited from her father. Her dad had bought the land one morning and had died of a massive stroke about two hours later on the same day. Ed

himself had thought Janet's dad had paid an awful lot of money for a hundred acres with some trees on it, and a thin, meandering river too shallow and rocky to be anything but decorative, but Janet had thought the place was wonderful. She'd spent the next three years planning how they would live there after he retired: they would build a house together; take long walks through the woods; get to know each other again.

He had suspected that she was almost pleased about it when a grenade launcher he was demonstrating to a gang of recruits malfunctioned and took a few years off his planned thirty year career in the service.

About the time the house was finished, Janet got a particularly vicious form of stomach cancer. She had died, quickly and painfully, insisting it wasn't fair. Ed didn't think so either. Over the twenty-six years they'd been married, he had thought of all sorts of ways he might lose her. She might get sick of worrying about him and leave him. She might get tired of being lonely while he marched around in foreign wars, and she might find somebody else. He had never thought she might die.

The sound of a siren woke him. He stood up carefully, balancing his weight on his stick. He'd overextended himself that morning, and now his leg was exacting its price. He could see down the long hall that stretched from the front hospital doors through the treatment areas to a rear emergency entrance standing open with an ambulance backed up to it. Medical types had taken someone from the ambulance and were leaning over him, working on him on the gurney right there in the hall. Outside the emergency doors a big American car pulled up beside the ambulance, and a man in a green jacket and plaid pants and a woman with polished blonde hair got out and hurried into the hospital corridor to hover anxiously around the gurney. Ed recognized the man in the plaid pants as Harry Harte, so he decided to wander over and see what was going on. He hadn't known there was anybody Harry cared enough about to follow to the hospital.

Ed had met Harry when Janet's dad died. Harry had been her father's real estate agent.

Harry had come to Janet's funeral too.

After Janet's death, Harry had offered to buy their house, but Ed had refused to sell. He was afraid that there was so little substance left to his life that if he gave up his house, he might somehow cease to exist at all.

Now Harry was leaning against the hospital wall, rubbing his hands on his thighs, a tight anxious look sitting strangely on his salesman's hearty face.

"What's up, Harry?" Ed gestured towards the gurney. "That a friend of yours?"

Around the gurney, the doctors and nurses straightened up in a disturbingly slow way, all of a sudden not in a hurry any more. One of them separated himself from the rest and came over to Harry. "I'm sorry, Mr. Harte, but I'm afraid that with Mr. Holde's history of heart disease, there wasn't much we could do for your partner."

Harry winced, his face going grim. "Art sure picked a helluva a time to shuffle off," he complained bitterly. "We're up to our kazoos in new construction, nature freaks are breathing down our necks, and now I'm supposed to manage all that by myself."

The blonde woman who'd come in with Harry put her hand on his arm. Harry took a couple of deep breaths and replaced the expression on his face with a more appropriately regretful one. "Art was a super guy," he said, "and I'm really going to miss him." He took a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. "I could always count on him to carry his weight." He wiped his nose again and put his handkerchief into a pocket in his slacks.

"Abby," he said to the blonde woman, "I want you to meet Ed. He owns that hundred acres next to where I'm building Songbird Estates." Harry put his arm around Abby's shoulders. "Abby's been the best secretary I've ever had." He smiled with the comfortable look of a man about to make a joke he'd made many times before and enjoyed every time. "She's also been the only secretary I've ever had. I can't get rid of her—she knows where all the bodies are buried."

Abby smiled pleasantly and extended a perfectly manicured hand tipped in bright red. "I'm pleased to meet you, Ed."

Ed was pleased to meet her. She wore a navy blue blouse, immaculate white slacks, and white spiked heels. Ed thought that she looked clean and shiny in a way that women younger than she almost never did. Ed, still holding her hand, started to say something to her, but he was interrupted by a short, dumpy woman bursting into the emergency area from the front lobby. "Where's Art?" the woman shouted. "Where's my husband?"

Harry stepped quickly between her and the gurney, spreading his hands defensively in front of it. Ed was struck by the way Harry

looked more as if he were protecting the body from her than trying to spare the woman a shock.

"I'm sorry, Rita," Harry announced to her. "I'm afraid Art's gone."

She looked past Harry to the sheet-covered body on the gurney. "Is that him?"

When Harry nodded, she started to cry. "I should have been here. I should have been with him when he died."

"How can you say that?" Harry demanded. "You were the last person he would have wanted with him."

Rita Holde's body quivered spasmodically, and she bundled her tiny hands into fists. "Don't you dare talk to me like that! I was Art's wife. I was married to him for twenty years."

"The last three of which you spent in court trying to squeeze every nickel you could out of him." Harry started speaking directly to Ed as if somebody had suddenly appointed Ed official arbitrator. "All she ever cared about was Art's money. She blocked their divorce for years, trying to bleed him white."

Rita Holde started talking to Ed too, as if she also believed he could make some last judgment on the matter. "Art would have left me without a penny. At my age! How would I have survived?" She turned abruptly back to Harry, hissing at him like a short, angry snake. "It was your fault! Art would have been fair with me if it hadn't been for you." She spoke to Ed again. "My lawyer tried to help me, but they hid things, they lied, they cheated. Between them, they were the biggest crooks in the state." She started to cry hysterically.

Harry's face turned brick red. "Don't you call me a crook," he shouted at her. "Art had a right to keep the things he worked hard for while you sat on your ass at home."

"He doesn't have to work hard now, does he?" Rita snapped. "He's dead and I'm still his wife. Everything he had belongs to me now."

Harry's mouth twisted convulsively. Flexing his hands, he took a step towards Rita Holde. Alarmed, Ed started to move between them, but Harry took a deep breath, and half-turned back to look at his partner's body. Staring at the gurney, he said, "Art didn't want you to have his money, Rita. He made a new will."

"I don't believe you."

"It's true." Harry was much calmer now, his color receding to its normal tan. "You tell that shark you hired for your divorce to get in touch with me and I'll send him a copy."

"I'll get in touch with more than a lawyer. I know all about you and how you do business. It wouldn't be the first piece of forgery you've dummied up."

"I don't intend to get into a name-calling session with you, Rita," Harry said. "You're much better at it than I am." He took Abby's arm and walked away.

Ed tried to slide out inconspicuously too, but Rita Holde, still sobbing, clutched blindly at his arm. "What can I do now?" she begged.

"If you notify an undertaker," Ed suggested; "they'll know what to do." They'd known what to do when Janet died.

He took Rita Holde's arm and walked her back to the hospital lobby where there was a box of tissues on the receptionist's desk, and he pulled out a handful for her. She wiped her face. "Well, he's going to get everything after all. I knew he'd win in the end."

"Ma'am?"

"Harry. You can bet that any will Art made while Harry was around named Harry as his only heir."

"You ought to talk to your lawyer about that, ma'am, but I think you have some rights in your husband's property, no matter what his will says." And it might be, Ed reflected, more than she would have gotten from a divorce.

That evening Ed was finishing off the bacon and eggs he'd cooked for his supper when Mary McIver drove up in her old VW Beetle. Pleased to see her—he'd been afraid that perhaps now that the Creeper had been saved, Mary and her friends might not be back—Ed watched her slide out of her car. She was not a young woman, and she carried a fair amount of middle-aged weight, mostly in her bust. It gave her a peculiarly wedged-in appearance behind her steering wheel. She came up his flagstone walk, and when she got to his door, she rang his bell, a rather formal thing to do considering that she'd been banging in and out of his house as if it were her own for weeks now.

"Is everything okay?" he asked. "The federal people didn't decide the Creeper's really just a funny-looking sparrow, did they?"

"They haven't decided anything yet. They're still conducting their studies, but the court order keeping Harte & Holde off the property is good until they finish. Then they'll probably make the court order permanent."

"Okay," he said, "well, what's up?" When she remained silent, he put his hand on her arm and rubbed it tentatively, the first

time he'd ever deliberately touched her. "Animal, vegetable, or mineral?"

She moved away from him. "There are better ways of conserving wildlife than breaking a man's leg."

He didn't want this conversation. "I take it you're upset about Bob Mahaga's knee?"

"Of course I'm upset. This isn't a war zone. It's not necessary to assault someone to reach our goal. There are other solutions."

"I just do what I'm told. You said we had to save the Creeper, so I saved it."

"The federal people would have protected it."

"By the time the federal people got there, there wouldn't have been a bird left to save."

She seemed to relax a little, the rigid lines in her body softening. "I have to admit," she conceded, "that I didn't realize the Creeper was in physical danger. I never thought Harte & Holde would defy the court order."

Ed shrugged. "If the bird just disappeared, Harry could have said a hawk or something got it."

"Well, now we know," Mary said briskly. "I intend to keep someone there all the time. They'll carry radios so they can notify the authorities if Harry Harte threatens the Creeper again." She picked up Ed's hand. "I want you to promise me you won't do anything like you did this morning again." When he started to speak, she held up her other hand in a gesture of silence. "I know you don't think the same way I do, but I want you to understand that if we use violence to save the Creeper—to me, that's not saving it at all."

Ed thought that probably the Creeper wouldn't agree with her, but he was happy to promise her whatever she wanted in exchange for her implied promise of his future involvement in her causes, and he tried to explain why.

"I never thought of myself as a, you know, nature person," he said awkwardly, "but I liked doing this Creeper thing, and anyway, I didn't have much to do with my time before, and I guess I'd like to do more with you and your friends." He stumbled for words. "You know what I mean."

She smiled at him warmly. "Of course I do." She surprised him by patting him on the knee. "I understand perfectly, but I have to go now so I can find someone to keep watch tonight over the Creeper's nest."

The next morning was one of those spring days that pulsed with life. Fifty isn't so old, Ed thought, I won't be dead for a long time. I ought to start looking around. Maybe I might get married again. He decided to walk into town for breakfast, arriving with only a few leg cramps to pay as penalty for the three mile trek.

Because most of Eaton Falls' newer residents shopped in a mall about twenty minutes away, Eaton Falls itself was still very small. The only place to buy a meal was a shabby diner with worn linoleum floors, wooden tables scratched with initials, and a six-stool counter in front of an old cast-iron grill. Ed had ordered a cheeseburger and a Coke and was sitting at the counter waiting for it when Abby, Harry Harte's blonde secretary, walked in and sat down beside him. Today she was wearing navy slacks with a red blazer, and she looked as bright and cheerful as flags waving on the Fourth of July.

"You're Ed, aren't you?" she asked.

"That's right," he answered, pleased she had recognized him.

"I'm surprised you remember me."

"Of course I do," she smiled. "After all, we're going to be neighbors."

When he stared at her, she dimpled prettily and said, "I'll be living in Songbird Estates."

"Uh, I'd be real happy to have you for a neighbor," he said hesitantly, "but I'd understood the bird people had put a lid on Songbird Estates."

"Oh," she shrugged, "I'm sure Harry will think of something to do about that. He's very clever, you know. Harry always finds a way to get what he wants."

"Well, in that case, if we're to be neighbors, can I buy you a cup of coffee?" When she nodded, he waved at the counterman. "Would you bring this young lady some coffee?"

That tickled her, and she giggled like a schoolgirl, moving her shoulders enticingly. "Maybe a lady," she laughed, "but not really young."

"From where I sat at my last birthday," Ed assured her, "you're young."

She laughed again, cocking her head to peek flirtatiously at him from the corners of her eyes. "Thanks to the best makeup money can buy."

Ed smiled back, wondering if she would mind if he asked her

out. He hadn't asked a woman for a date since he and Janet were married.

Abby moved her shoulders again. "You know," she said, "you ought to let Harry buy your property. I know he'd pay you more than you could get anyplace else."

He could feel his smile stiffening. "You sound like Harry."

She dimpled again, as if she thought he'd complimented her. "I probably shouldn't tell you how much Harry wants your property because you might take advantage of him."

Ed already knew how much Harry wanted his property. He'd tried to buy it enough times. "I'm surprised," Ed said thoughtfully, "that Harry didn't buy it before my father-in-law did."

Abby took a cautious sip of her coffee, as if she thought it might be too hot. "Maybe Harry didn't have enough cash to buy the whole parcel right then."

"Harry seems to be having better luck these days," Ed said. "If Art Holde hadn't changed his will, Harry might have had to put Songbird Estates someplace else."

Abby set her coffee cup down carefully. "Harry owned that property himself. It wasn't part of Harte & Holde's assets." She stood up, leaving her cup almost full. "I have to be getting back to the office now. If you're interested in selling, come over. I'd love to talk to you about it."

The next morning Ed ate his breakfast at home. Mary McIver's Beetle was parked in his gravel driveway, but she wasn't in it, so he took his food out to the picnic table on his deck where he could watch for her coming back from the woods. His eyes weren't what they used to be, so it wasn't until she got almost to the house that he saw she was crying. She climbed up onto his deck and wordlessly opened her hand, extending it to him so he could see what she carried: a bunch of grey and brown feathers that scarcely looked as if it had ever been a bird at all.

He took the bird's body from her hand and stared at it. "What happened?"

Mary shrugged and wiped her shirtsleeve across her eyes. "I think it was the cropduster that sprayed those soybean fields south of here yesterday. I had my cousin watching the Creeper's nest. He said the plane made a wide loop over the edge of the woods."

Abby had been right: she had said Harry always found a way to get what he wanted.

"It couldn't have cost too much," Ed said. "A few dollars to the

pilot—he has a little trouble controlling the spray.”

Looking down at the thin, dead bird in his hand, Ed suddenly noticed how thin his own wrist had become. Under his skin, the flesh seemed to have shrunk away from the bone. When did my arm get like that? he wondered. I used to have muscles, not bones showing that way. He stared up into the fiery red morning sun. I used to be strong.

Mary McIver had sunk to the picnic table bench. “I don’t know what to do. I’m certain there’re more Grey-breasted Creepers in those woods, but the federal people won’t protect them unless we can prove they’re there.”

“Then you’d better get busy and find another nest, hadn’t you,” Ed said, without looking at her, “because if I were Harry, I’d have the bulldozers in there this morning.”

“He can’t,” she said decisively. “He can’t start clearing that property until the court order expires, or the federal people discover the bird is dead, whichever comes first, so we’ve got a little more time to hunt for another nest.”

She took off, leaving Ed there at the picnic table, still holding the Creeper in his hand and staring into the sun. When he heard her car start, he pulled his gaze away from the sun to the mist steaming up from the marsh beside the unseen river.

“You and me, bird,” he said aloud. “We’re gonna be as extinct as dinosaurs. Harry’s gonna inherit the earth.”

He set the body gently down on the picnic table. It seemed kind of silly to bury a bird, but he didn’t feel as if he could just throw it away. When he tried to stand up so he could go look for a box, his leg throbbed bitterly, making him stumble, and he had to grab onto the picnic table for support. The pain was distracting, and he was grateful for that. But, for some reason, it made him think about his father-in-law’s dying the same day he’d bought this place. He wondered what Janet’s dad had intended to do with the property. Retire on it? Maybe hold it as an investment the way Harry Harte had held the hundred acres beside it? It was odd Harry hadn’t bought both hundred acre parcels. He’d certainly known they were both for sale: he had been the real estate agent when Janet’s dad bought his hundred acres.

A suspicion was growing in Ed’s mind, an almost physical sensation that buoyed him up, lifting him away from his despair. When he’d asked Abby why Harry hadn’t bought this property before Janet’s dad did, she had gotten all cautious and quiet as if he’d

said something dangerous. What was it Harry had said about her at the hospital? Abby knew where all the bodies were buried.

Ed took the Creeper inside and put it into a plastic bag. He would take care of it later. He wanted to find out if he'd been right when he told Janet that her father had paid too much for his property.

It was well after noon when Ed walked into the Harte & Holde Real Estate Company offices, a converted storefront where, twenty years before, hardware had been sold. Now the old board and batten walls were papered with blueprints and sketches of houses done up in charcoal and watercolors. Abby sat at a small desk beside the entrance door, and through an open door behind her, Ed could see Harry sitting at a much larger desk in his office.

Abby walked around her desk to greet him. "You did come to us after all," she said in a pleased, little-girl voice. "I know you won't be sorry."

He smiled regretfully at her. She looked so nice, done up today in kelly green with a white blouse.

Harry had come out of his office and was walking towards Ed with his hand out. "What can we do for you today, Ed?"

Ed smiled at Harry but didn't shake his hand. "I was at the tract index in the County Building this morning," he told Harry. "You know the place, it's where people record deeds. It was real interesting. According to your deed in the tract index, you bought your hundred acres from James Schafer, the same man my father-in-law bought his hundred acres from, and on the same day, too. I thought that was so interesting that I telephoned James Schafer in Florida where he's living in a retirement home, and I asked him about it, and you know what? He doesn't remember ever selling you anything. He only remembers selling *two* hundred acres to my father-in-law." Harry went stone-still. Ed smiled hugely. Maybe Mary McIver was right. There was something to this nonviolent stuff. "You know what I think, Harry? I think that when my father-in-law dropped dead before his purchase was recorded in the tract index, you saw a chance to cut yourself in. You went to his funeral and found out that Janet and I didn't know exactly how much land he had bought, and then you went home, did a little creative deed writing, and recorded half of the land for him and half for you."

Harry was moving quietly now, kind of sidling around until he stood between Ed and the door. "I hope you haven't been spreading this slander all over town," he said in a heavy, threatening way.

Ed smiled warmly. "Your phone will ring any minute now. It'll

be Rita Holde's lawyer. I figured as long as I was in the County Building anyway, I'd stop and take a look at Art Holde's will, and you know what? That will was dated the day Art died, and it was witnessed by Abby here and by Bob Mahaga. That was the same day I was sitting under a tree with Bob Mahaga, waiting to take him to the hospital. I know for a fact that Bob Mahaga wasn't anywhere near Art Holde that day, not unless Art got up before dawn to rewrite his will."

The phone did ring then, making Harry start and look away from Ed. Ed brought his stick up hard into Harry's groin, sending Harry to his knees gasping in pain. "See you in court, Harry," he said cheerfully, stepping around him to the door.

Outside, Mary McIver was driving by. When she saw Ed, she slammed on her brakes and jumped from her car. "Ed," she shouted, "is it true? You own the land where the Creepers nest?"

He put his arm around her shoulder. "It's true," he said. "I figure that's part of the reason Harry wanted to buy my place so bad. If I gave him a deed for everything my father-in-law had, Harry could have wound up owning the whole two hundred acres without my ever suspecting a thing."

"What will happen to him now?" she demanded fiercely. "Will he go to jail?"

"Not for this," Ed said regretfully. "The sheriff says it was too long ago when Harry forged his deed, but even so, Harry doesn't own that land. He can't give himself title. The sheriff was real interested, though, when I talked to him about Art Holde's will."

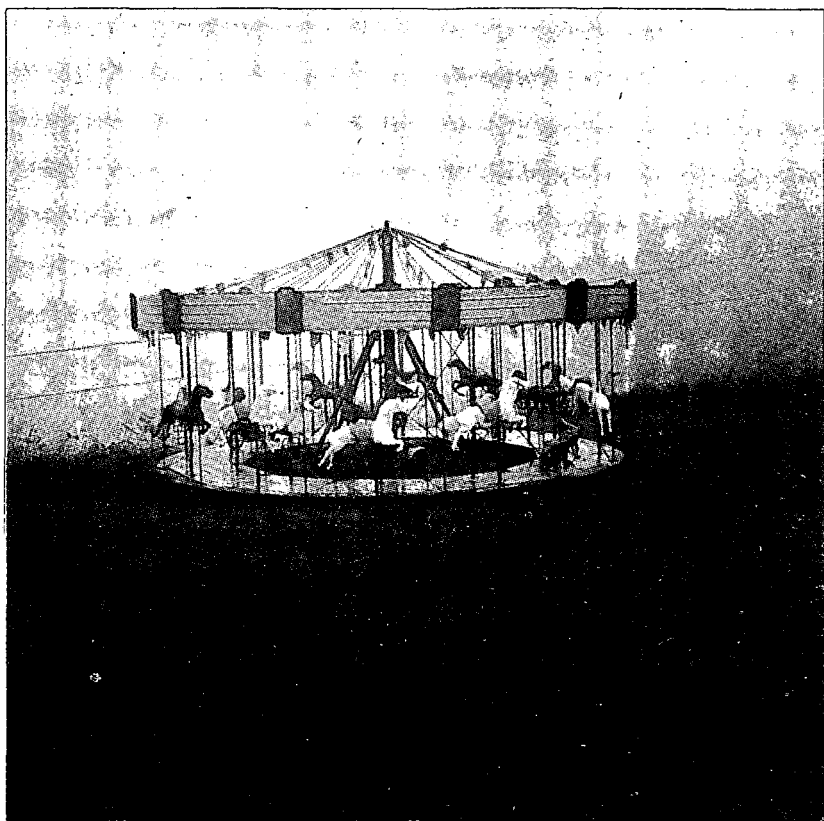
Mary looked past Ed's shoulder, through Harry's window into his office. "What's the matter with him? Why is he on the floor like that?"

"You don't need to worry," Ed assured her. "I found out about his not owning that land and about Art Holde's will, all without any rough stuff or anything like that, so you don't need to feel bad about saving the Creeper's nesting area."

"What did happen to him?"

He squeezed her shoulder and started walking her back to her car. "Listen," he said, "that one was for the bird. The Creeper would have wanted me to do that."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



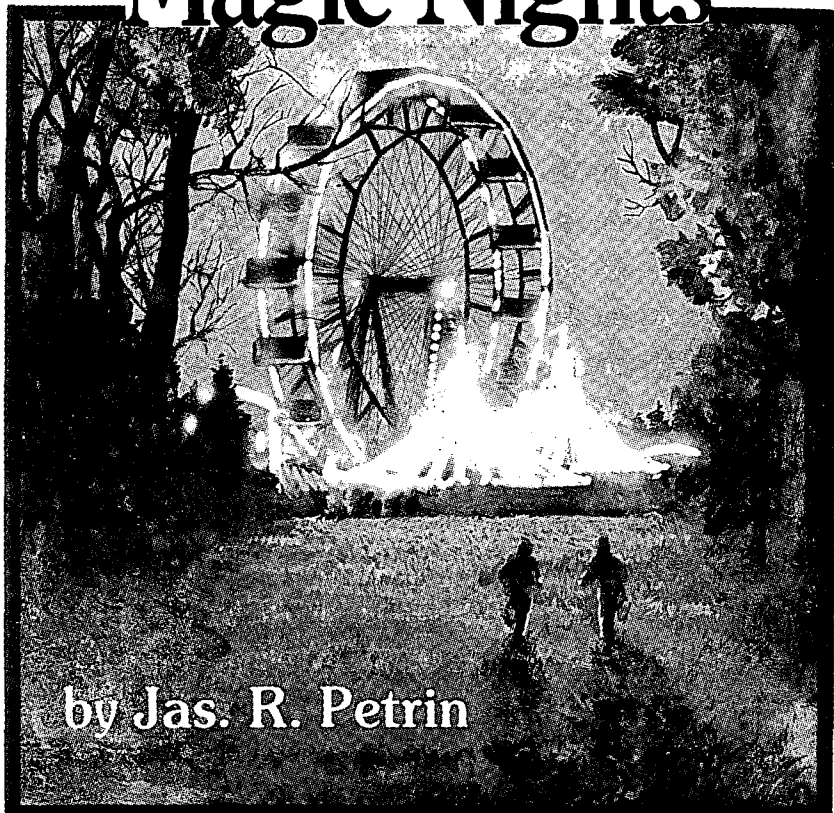
Arthur Tress

A lonely spot for a *merry-go-round*. But maybe that's as it should be? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the November Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

Magic Nights



by Jas. R. Petrin

Being on a lower branch of the tree, Tom could see only the electric-yellow patch of wall over the curtain and a shadow drifting behind it. Ralph had a higher and better view, one foot on Tom's shoulder, stretched out along his own branch like a cat.

"The body," said Ralph, "must be old Mrs. Scharf, his mother. He's cut her all to pieces in the sink, and now he's stuffing the parts into his pockets."

"Why would he do that? Let me look."

But Ralph didn't budge. Tom could only watch the shadow, a movement of purple behind the screen. For a moment he had in his mind's eye a vision of Mr. Scharf the druggist in his wheezing,

Illustration by Nick Jainschigg

pink-faced jollity, stooping over his kitchen sink, red to the elbows, tucking body parts into his shirt and whistling.

"Why'd he do it?" Tom persisted. He was a visiting city cousin, and ignorant.

"She was a witch," said Ralph.

They rustled down out of the owl-shadowed midnight leaves, wrists and elbows all tree sap and scratches. Ralph had torn his trousers.

"I'll say a dog did it."

"It was black," Tom agreed.

"And as big as me. Now, come on. I'll show you the place where they all dance naked."

The two boys ran into the magic night, sailing their bodies like hawks over the grey grass, past the shadowed houses with their windows lit like eyes, past the school, past the church, white and straight, burning like a chimney lamp against the black New England woods. They jumped a low iron fence and walked among graves.

"This is creepy," Tom said.

"No, it isn't," Ralph replied. "It's safe. They don't bury witches in holy ground."

They sprang away on rubber soles, soft as cats.

But in the woods, at the end of the thin path that wound like a vein, near the heap of rusting moon-shadowed cars, a dewy meadow was deserted. No one was naked; no one danced.

They ran home.

It was Ralph's home actually. Ralph's and Aunt Mary's and Uncle Harry's. The boys leaped the three porch stairs and crashed through the door into the kitchen, and Aunt Mary wrestled Ralph out of his trousers, scolding all dogs and boys, then gave them ice cream to eat in the dark on the front porch swing.

"See that house?" said Ralph, pointing his spoon. "It's got bats."

"Where's Uncle?"

"He'll be late. He sees women. Mom's boiling."

Tom was doubtful. Aunt Mary might be warm, but never hot. She was short and full and comfortable, like a pillow. Soft as the cobwebs she pretended to find with her quick, whisking broom. Warm-as the afghans she wove around every hard surface and sharp edge in the house.

"Do they fight?" Tom whispered.

"Dad does," Ralph said, "by himself." He pointed to a lamp-lit tree, bent at its waist like an old crooked man with a load of leaves

on his back. "They hanged seven ladies there once." Then he added with reluctance, as though it pained him to admit it: "It was a mistake. None of them were witches."

They went in to bed. Hours later Tom awoke to hear Ralph's ragged breath, and Uncle downstairs thundering things and roaring so that the wall shook the book out of the casement to let the window fall down. Uncle might have been storming about the house all alone; Aunt Mary never made a peep; perhaps he'd killed her.

It was a terrible and wonderful thing to hear a drunken man roar in the night.

Tom and Ralph were up with the sun.

"Do you think we'll still be going," whispered Tom, "after last night?"

"Oh, sure, we never miss Cider Days Fair."

There was the belling of pots downstairs, the thump of the freezer door: Aunt Mary in her knitted slippers sculpting breakfast out of frozen blocks. And Uncle in the bathroom, whistling and yodeling under the shower. The boys ate like wolves, Uncle with laughs, growls, and winks, Aunt Mary with smiles so hard and thin you could have picked them up and whittled them with a knife.

They escaped to the car with Uncle. Couldn't get away quick enough from the sudden Eskimo arctic of Aunt Mary's kitchen and her bleak living room tundra.

Apple Cider Day!

The boys held their breath.

Marching bands, sack races, cotton candy, and frowning clowns. Three darts for a quarter, hit a balloon, win a prize. Spill a fat lady into water with a baseball. Toss a small ring around a large bottle, a large ball through a small hole, take any prize from *this* shelf. See the largest horse, almost, in the world. See a chicken spell its name. See old frowning farmers with thick silent wives, girls thin as celery, clutching coins. And an enormous plush bear on a tiny boy.

Roller coasters, mirror mazes, candy apples, wishing wells . . .

"But first," said Uncle, "I got to make a stop."

Ralph winked.

Uncle swerved the car in at Ashton's Music School, Lessons, \$10.00 Per Hour. The boys craned their necks. They could just see the top of the ferris wheel, flying its candy cars above the barber shop roof. A huge voice woofed in the distance, loud-speakering them suddenly on a gust of music. Uncle gave them each ten dol-

lars; and Tom nearly mentioned the ten dollars Aunt Mary had already given them, before Ralph kicked him.

"You can walk from here . . ." Uncle began, but the boys were already running. "Meet you later . . ." he echoed his voice down the empty street after them.

From the top of the stairs, Alice Ashton spotted Harold Martins' raw-boned body through the sheers and tingled. She drew the door open in her grandest manner, and he smiled his lopsided grin. He seemed slightly embarrassed.

"Is Loreen here, Ash?"

She pulled him gently in.

"Loreen is upstairs practicing her lesson. And I *won't* have you interrupting her."

It was an elegant hall, she liked to think, cool and shaded. A wide mahogany staircase, a grandmother clock doling out time with easy hollow ticks. Deep varnished silences. She knew Harold Martins from school days; she sometimes thought she might have married him if not for that prissy Mary Smith—what he'd ever seen in *her* . . .! And now he was chasing the college girls: Loreen James could be his daughter. Well, he'd soon learn Alice Ashton had other plans for him.

A bone-chilling moan issued from an upstairs room. Alice lifted herself under her white shift and said sweetly, "She just *murders* the saxophone, doesn't she?"

She led him into the drawing room, shutting out the sound with tall sliding doors. She was careful to pause under the huge, stuffed, glaring owl; she liked to have it behind her, wings half lifted, settling as though to seize her and carry her off; she felt it gave her an air of menace.

"You *will* have a whisky?"

He sat on the chair as though he might break it.

"Just a short one. I've brought the boys up to the fair." His eyes were fixed on the ceiling; you'd have thought his gaze could penetrate to Loreen James through the plaster.

Alice poured a strong one for him and a weak one for herself. She considered how to approach her subject.

"Bob Cole is leaving our group," she said finally.

He nodded. He might not have heard her. His thoughts were elsewhere in the house.

She went on.

"He took your place a year ago. Now he's been transfered out

west. So we're left without our thirteen again, Harold."

Harold said nothing.

"We want you to come back."

Harold Martins smiled. He ruffled his hair before he spoke, a mannerism that had always attracted her—a little boy in a man's body.

"I got no time any more for that witchcraft stuff."

"You used to have time for it." She hesitated, then added: "And for me."

But his eyes were still on the ceiling.

"The coven thing was fun," he said, "for a while. But maybe I got tired of it." He hesitated, and then added, "Or maybe you just started getting too mean, Ash. At the beginning you said we'd only do white magic."

She could have reached out and clawed him.

"We aren't an entertainment," she snapped, "to amuse farm boys. What we do is serious business. Sometimes hard things must be done—punishments." She shook her head at him. "I'm sorry now I let you go. I should never have let you get away from us. You took an oath!"

"Bob Cole took an oath."

"That's different. He's not leaving by choice." She tightened her voice. "We must have our thirteen!"

Harold Martins still had his smile; but it was wilting. "I got no time, Ash. You can easy find somebody else."

"No."

She stood up. "I want you." She floated across the thick, silent carpet until she was standing over him. There was an especially loud wail from the room upstairs; even the sliding doors couldn't keep it out. She took his face in her hands. "I want you. . . ."

Steam tractors.

The boys lusted after them.

Bon-fired, black-smoked, and silver-breathed. Blaring their dinosaur whistles and steel-cleating the ground, the monsters pistoned by, crewed by snow-haired, tobacco-faced men who winked and waved.

Ralph had spent nine, and Tom eight of the ten dollars Uncle Harry had given them. They'd been whirled, swung, tossed, and dropped. Cotton-candied, orange-popped, and red-stick-licoriced. Tom had ridden a horse; Ralph, a camel. Neither of them had yet been properly frightened.

They had reached the end of the midway and stood at the entrance to the House of Horrors. Ralph fingered his money.

"I bet it's a rip-off."

"Look at the pictures," Tom urged; "there's a vampire—"

"Wax," said Ralph.

"There's skeletons—"

"Sticks."

"And ghosts."

"Sheets."

Tom sighed. "Well," he said, "there's a witch."

"Okay," said Ralph.

Up a stair, through a curtain—blackness!

"Holy cow," said Ralph; "it's darker than the crawl hole under the back of the church."

Down a ramp, round a corner, antenna-fingertips quivering, like two human ants in a tunnel, moving with short, nervous steps.

Pow!

A ghost on a stick exploded, shrieking.

"Yahhh!" The boys grabbed one another and jumped away into a skeleton that plunged on a wire. "Help!" They blundered round a corner. An air blast zapped them, gusting them up to a snap-open curtain and a screeching fanged face. And a bat danced on their heads.

They came to the witch under a blue light, gasping.

She was seated in the wall on a chair, dried-up and twisted, a crone. There was a peaked cap, broken-ended. A parsnip nose. Taloned, broom-strangling fingers, stripe-stockinged ankles sprouting thin as weeds out of buckled shoes. Sunken cheeks, bulbous eyes, warts . . . And a black cat perched on her shoulder as though on a fence.

"There's dust on that cat," whispered Ralph.

The witch flew at them, screaming.

They fled out into the sun.

The midway had not changed. There were still the pressing, laughing, suntanned people, the rides flying against the blue sky. And the ticket seller eyeing them impassively. They stopped to collect themselves, and walked off with dignity.

"That didn't even look like a witch," said Ralph.

"What does a witch look like, then?"

"Like Miss Ashton."

And suddenly here was Uncle Harry to end their afternoon, clapping their shoulders, joking and jostling them into the car, singing

them back to the house, where Aunt Mary took them over with a dark look and a jar of liniment.

"They're burnt to a crisp!" she grumbled softly at Uncle. "Haven't you any sense at all?"

Alice Ashton was ready when Loreen James came down the stairs, one final wounded-saxophone wail still shivering the music room dust.

It had been close.

She had moved quickly in the basement room: a lamp in the magic circle; a consecration of salt and water; a summoning of the spirits. Through the circle she channeled the power of the twelve—not nearly as powerful as with the thirteen, of course, which is why she had decided to use her strongest spell.

And to choose from her most precious ingredients.

Hemlock, belladonna, arsenic, cyanide . . .

She had metered her selection carefully from the little pressed-tin boxes, and pestled them into a tincture . . .

She was waiting in the hall when Loreen came smiling down the stairs.

"I don't know where the afternoon went, Miss Ashton. You didn't come back. And I just kept on with page seventeen trying to get it right."

"I'm so sorry, my dear. But someone came to the door and I could not shake them off. Next lesson free, all right?" She stopped Loreen at the bottom stair. "Just let me have a look at that instrument, dear. It's making the most *unusual* sounds, and I'm sure it isn't you."

She had the case sprung in a moment, and the mouthpiece in her hand. "Well! No wonder. Just look at this reed, it *must* be replaced. I suspected as much and got another one out. Let me slip it in for you—there; try that just as soon as you get home."

"You shouldn't bother, Miss Ashton—"

"Oh, but I feel responsible. After all, Ashton Music is lending you this instrument. And even the best musicians can't get music out of a bad reed."

The door banged shut on Loreen James, and silence fell upon the house like a dark, settling dust. Alice watched the girl hurry down the walk, too full of life, too topped up with the stupid, naive cheeriness of youth. Bouncing bright hair, tight jeans, quick white runners flashing in the sun. . . .

And swinging at her thigh went the battered music case, gleam-

ing on the inside with a grin of keys and buttons, and a lurking charm ready to lash out and strike like a bite.

“**A** night visit,” Ralph said, “we got to do it. It’s the only way to enjoy a fair.” He added, as if it were a reason in itself, “We still got the money Mom gave us.”

The weather had turned cooler, grey clouds tumbling over the town. They sat on the vacation-cleared steps of the school and chewed gum.

“Anyways,” he continued, “I want to go through that haunted house again. I want to figure out how some of those spooky things work.”

“I already figured them out,” Tom said. “I think there must be treadles. Some sort of switches under the floor that make things pop out at you.”

“You know that for sure?”

“Not for *sure*.”

“Then it’s settled. We go back to see if you’re right. And we go tonight, okay?”

But Tom was staring hard at an elderly woman toiling by on the far side of the street with two sagging shopping bags that might have held bricks. He sucked in his breath.

“Say, Ralph, isn’t that old Mrs. Scharf, the drugstore man’s mother?”

Ralph jawed at his gum. “Yeah, it is.”

The woman struggled on down the street.

“But I thought she was dead. That night, in the window—you said Mr. Scharf was cutting her up.”

“He was.”

There was a silence.

“But there she is,” Tom said flatly.

Ralph shrugged. “I told you she was a witch, didn’t I? I bet now she’s cut *him* up, and she’s carting him away in those bags.” He snapped his gum and his eyes glazed over. “Just think,” he said, “how great it’ll be on the midway after dark, everything lit up like fireworks, everything bigger, brighter, busier. *That’s* the time to take in the House of Horrors, with the dark breathing after you in those passages like a murderer. We got to go. We got to do it, Tom!”

Tom hugged his knees. “Aunt Mary’s dead set against it.”

Ralph snorted. “Mom worries too much. She figures we’d get robbed or beat up or something—nights is when the city folks come

out here. But, Jeez, who'd ever catch *us* if we had half a step head start. We're going, and that's all there is to it."

"If Aunt Mary finds out . . ."

"She'll only find out if she looks in my room. And she never does *that*." He pointed. "See that old geezer there? He once served twenty years for murder—killed a tax man with a hammer."

They found Uncle in the back yard when they got home, sitting on a box, staring at the ground; he didn't even look up. Aunt Mary explained it to them, whispering grimly over a piecrust she was rolling out on the table. They looked at one another, then slipped up to Ralph's room, stocking-footed, and sat on the edge of the bed.

"I don't get it," said Tom. "Is this Loreen James related to your dad?—a cousin, or something?"

Ralph laughed thinly. "A kissing cousin, maybe. Don't you know anything about grownups?"

Tom thought. Then a sense of awareness slowly gripped him. "You mean Uncle Harry and that girl . . .?"

"I told you he saw girls, didn't I?"

Tom whistled. "Your poor dad—your poor *mom*!"

"Tonight," Ralph said, back in his own world. "We're going *tonight*!"

Alice Ashton slammed down the phone and felt her blood pressure shoot up a pound. Where was the saxophone mouthpiece? The instrument itself lay here before her, a long flash of gold in the velvet bed of its case.

Without a mouthpiece.

She had called the James house, waited on the phone while Mrs. James sent her boys scouring the place, had listened to the thump and bump of feet on the stairs while Mrs. James sobbed into the phone about her "little darling." The tiresome woman. Didn't she know about Harold Martins and the dark of the Beacon Theater? Or the car in the night on the River Road hill? The town cats knew more than she did.

The mouthpiece. Where was it? It still carried its spell. She had to find it.

She scowled up at the owl with its bat-spread wings, looking as though it knew precisely where to look but was being silent just out of spite. And another thing. She had better not wait. Now was

the time to talk Harold Martins back into the fold. Now was when he'd be needing someone most.

She dialed.

But it wasn't Harold who answered—it was Mary. For a brief moment Alice was tempted to hang up the receiver without a word; she had done *that* before. But now, with the success of her spell, she felt bold. Mary's voice came feather-soft and paper-thin over the wires. A delicate voice, but one with a made-up mind behind it.

"No, Alice, I most certainly will *not* let you speak to my husband."

"But I only want to console him, Mary. Over his loss."

"He's got me for that." A so-soft voice, like dandelion seeds, floating.

"You, dear." Alice could not restrain her contempt. "He hasn't needed you for a long time, has he? Let *me* speak to him."

"I won't."

Alice felt her patience beginning to curdle.

"You're very bold now, aren't you, dear? Now that Harold doesn't have his little Loreen to run to."

"He didn't have her anyway." A soft voice, but chill; like settling crystals of ice. "Loreen James visited me yesterday. She had just come from your place, she had her music case with her—"

Alice froze.

"—she sat right here on the sofa and told me how foolish she had been, and how sorry she was, and how she had decided to stay away from Harold for good. She was crying, and I believe she was truly sorry and that she meant every word of it."

Alice was dying to ask about the music case.

"Any *real* woman," she said, "would have slapped the little tramp silly, coming to you as bold as that."

"Any woman like you is what you mean, Alice. But I'm not like you. I don't pounce on people with my claws out."

"So," Alice said, "she told you all this nonsense, grabbed her music case and ran out the door, is that it?"

"Not at all. In fact, though I don't expect you to believe it, I think we became friends. We had a nice talk. I asked her about her school, about her music. She even took her saxophone out of its case to show me . . ."

Alice sucked in her breath.

" . . . I asked her to play something for me . . ."

Alice pushed the phone into her ear so hard she hurt her head:

"... she played some scales—she said it was all she had learned from you: I wasn't surprised about that—then we heard a car out back, I said it was Harold getting home, and she ran out of the front door and disappeared. Then later I heard how she ..."

"And she left the instrument case?"

"Yes. And that's all you're worried about, isn't it? She left it and I sent it straight to her house."

"You should have sent it to me. It was mine. And there's a part missing, too—the mouthpiece. What'd you do with it?"

Mary Martins' voice got even softer now; and chillier.

"Is that so important? Don't you care a thing about that poor girl? She was your student, after all." There was a pause; then Mary said, "*I did* find a little part afterwards. It's in my purse. I'm going to send it along to Mrs. James."

A hunger ran away with Alice's voice: "You send it to me, do you hear? It's mine!"

She was sorry immediately. She could almost hear the suspicions crackle in the mousy little head at the end of the line. Finally, Mary said carefully, "I don't give anything to anyone that can't say please."

"But it's mine. You got to give it to me, Mary Martins. If you don't—"

Mary's voice came smiling down the line. "You'll what—cast a spell on me?"

So Mary knew about the coven. Of course, Harold would have told her. He was sworn to secrecy, and he had told her. But since she knew. . . .

"I will. I will cast a spell on you, Mary Martins. I'll. . ."

"Do it, then," Mary's voice crisped softly in the earpiece. "Go on. I dare you."

The challenge was infuriating—like being pricked by a needle. Alice replied with her lips drawn over her teeth, slinking her voice like a cat: "You can pretend to be brave, Mary Martins. But what about your family? Your boy?"

"You don't scare me at all with your make-believe," snapped Mary right back. "I know you too well, Alice Ashton—there's more bitch than witch about you!"

The phone banged down in Alice's ear.

Alice stood with the receiver still in her hand, stunned. It wasn't the language, she used that herself when it suited. But coming from Goodie Two-Shoes Martins, that one tame word was like a slap in the face.

Damn the woman. Alice slammed her own phone down so hard the bells rang. Her mind was already made up. She knew exactly what she was going to do. And no power on earth was going to keep her from it.

She stamped through the kitchen to the basement door, pounded down, down, down the stairs to her very private room, which she unlocked with a key on a thong around her neck. Mary Martins had scoffed at the thirteen. Mary Martins must have her come-uppance. . . .

The little room was a very special place; there was no other like it in a hundred miles. Alice had attended every sabbat in the area for the last ten years, and she ought to know.

In the center of the floor, beautifully painted by her own hand, was her circle, nine feet in diameter, marked with signs of the caballa: a lens to focus her power, a protection from the demons whom she often summoned to help in her work. From a deal table she took an incense burner, a container of salt, a chalice of water, and a dagger. All of this she took into the circle and placed on a tiny, low altar. Then she knelt in the circle herself and began her chant. . . .

She exhaled. The blood tingled in her fingers.

So now it was Mary Martins who stood in the way of the thirteen. She placed her dagger, *athame*, in the very center of the circle and lifted her hands. . . .

Mary Martins sat in her little parlor with her hands clenched tight in her lap. She sat without stirring, her slow breaths lifting, lifting, lifting her blouse. A beam of sunlight edged along the floor, trailing gold, orange, brown, then fading grey. Shadows gathered in the corners of the room.

Shadows.

She raised herself, finally, creaking the chair and the floor, crossing the room to the hall closet where she took from her purse a small object carefully wrapped in a plastic breadbag. This she studied carefully, thinking, thinking. . . .

Suddenly she recoiled as though the thing had bitten her. It fell to the floor. She watched it where it lay while a new comprehension came slowly over her.

She picked up the object gingerly, returned it to her purse, went into the kitchen, and thoroughly washed her hands.

Now to the door to snap-bang the locks into place. Now along

the hall, past the empty kitchen to rattle the chain onto the back door. The old stairboards groaned her up to the second floor.

She looked in on Harold, sprawled on his bed fully dressed, drawing his breath in deep, heavy gasps as though the very act of sleep exhausted him.

Mary crossed the hall to her own room, then paused, went three more steps down the narrow passage and peeked into the boys' room.

An empty bed.

She stood for several long moments with her hand on the door-knob, then turned and went with certain, quick steps back down the stairs. She put on her coat, took her purse, let herself out of the house, carefully locking the door behind her.

“Isn’t this more like it, though?” Ralph had to shout his words over the high-flying wind.

The ferris wheel had stopped. They swayed in a car at the top of the fair, the midway lights strewn below them like a handful of Christmas, the stars in the huge black bowl of the sky floating over the town like dust. Magic lay all around.

“I can see the post office,” Ralph howled.

Tom pointed, “And the church.”

“And the cars on First Street.”

The wind shrieked, and tilted them.

“And—I can see your mom!” said Tom. He gripped Ralph’s arm, “That is Aunt Mary, isn’t it?”

An unmistakable plump female figure was hurrying towards the fairgrounds along the street, bowing against the night breeze, a purse like a sack gripped under one arm.

Tom felt Ralph stiffen. “Jeez, you’re right! That is Mom. She must have checked my room.” He bit his lip. “We got to get away. We can’t let her catch us here. We got to get back to the house, get right to bed, tell her in the morning we just went out for a walk because we couldn’t sleep—”

Tom broke in. “And who’s that coming along behind her?”

Ralph looked. “That’s Miss Ashton—the music teacher. Hey! Did you see that?”

For a second Aunt Mary had paused, turned quickly to glance behind her. And at that exact moment Miss Ashton had faded into a shop doorway.

The huge wheel lurched back to life and began rolling them downward.

"There's something weird going on," said Tom. He looked at Ralph, then at the ground lifting splashes of light up to them out of the dark. "Maybe we ought to find out what it is."

"How?"

Their car was on the ground, the operator tipping them out of their seats like delicate baggage.

Tom led the way to the back of a hot dog stand. "Aunt Mary's got to walk right by here if she comes in the gate."

Ralph swayed, and caught at a rope tying a tent to a spike. He was still looking back at the ferris wheel; it was moving again, drifting against the black sky like a burning circle.

"Here she comes!" hissed Tom, flattening himself against the stand.

They had hidden themselves just in time. Aunt Mary was approaching quickly along the midway, raking the squealing rides and the ticket-clutching lineups with her sharp eyes. They let her pass. Ralph would have stepped out after her, but Tom held him back.

"Look."

It was Miss Ashton. She had come into the fairground, too, right on the heels of Aunt Mary. She took no interest at all in the sights around her but walked with a purposeful, stalking stride. She kept one hand pressed to her side as though she were easing a pain.

Tom said, "That Miss Ashton is following your mother. Why would she do that?"

Ralph shrugged. "Let's find out."

This was a new and stimulating game. Tom could see his own excitement glowing in Ralph's eyes. It was like secret agents. Now, in the color and lights, in the crazy sounds, the pressing, laughing, fun-seeking people, they were suddenly caught up in something bigger than a stolen night out. They were putting one foot into the half-opened doorway of an adult world. Anything might happen. They expected it.

Along they went: Aunt Mary leading, scouring everything to her right and left; Miss Ashton hanging back, the one hand curiously pressed to her side; then the two boys, rubber-treading the packed earth, melting along in the wake of the women like two cats.

"Mom's looking for us," Ralph said. "That's plain."

"Yes," said Tom; "but what's Miss Ashton looking for?"

"She's got something in her hand. Some old roll of paper, or something."

"Yeah, or cloth."

Aunt Mary stopped; Miss Ashton stopped; the boys stopped.

Aunt Mary studied the Whirl-A-Way, plunging and hurtling its screaming prisoners in flashing steel cages through the waves of exploding music and the booming "Wanna go faster?" voice. The prisoners squealed "Yes-No," and the machine roared and flung them through the night wind, howling.

Aunt Mary trotted on, then stopped again, this time to scrutinize the Dodge-em car drivers. "Hey," said Ralph, "Miss Ashton's moving up. Look."

Miss Ashton seemed to have changed her strategy. No longer simply hanging back and following, she was creeping closer to Aunt Mary, taking advantage of the crowd. The Dodge-em cars crashed and buzzed, showering blue sparks. Miss Ashton was three, now two, now one person away when Aunt Mary spun on her heel and hurried on.

"I don't like it," said Tom. "Something awful's going to happen. We got to warn your Mom."

Ralph wasn't convinced.

"Wait a bit. It could be nothing. We can't give ourselves away for no reason. We can still beat Mom back home when she's ready to leave. I don't want to be grounded the rest of the summer if I can help it."

The crowd was thinning rapidly, diluted by the chill and the lateness of the hour. When they reached the House of Horrors, the once bustling midway was reduced to small knots of stragglers. Aunt Mary hurried faster, as if the House of Horrors was what she had been looking for all along. She paid her money and went straight in.

"She must have heard us talking about that place," Ralph said. "She figures we might be in there." He sucked in his breath. "And look at *her*."

Miss Ashton had also bought a ticket, and was hurrying after Aunt Mary. She had discarded the cloth wrapping. There was a wink of light in her hand.

Both boys jumped forward at once. The idea of soft, vulnerable Aunt Mary being stalked in the bat-and-monster darkness was too much for them. They paid. They slipped through the entrance. And stopped.

There was someone standing a few feet ahead of them in the darkness, breathing. They could sense it. And somewhere ahead, a whisper of footsteps.

Farther on, something slammed like a door. There was a scream

of wild laughter. Tom felt his heart jump under his collar and stay there: up ahead Aunt Mary must have just met the ghost. He felt the presence in front of them shift away into the passage. And again, farther on, a snap of wires like a tangling clothesline, a rattle like clothespins: the skeleton.

Tom searched for Ralph's sleeve, plucked at it, whispering, "You stick to Miss Ashton. I'll slip by her and warn Aunt Mary." He was moving before Ralph could argue.

Tom was glad of his rubber soles. The presence ahead of him could not move so silently, but went with a creak of wood floor and shoe leather and the tapping point force of a narrow heel. But the passage was narrow; it would not be an easy matter to slip by anyone unnoticed.

He formed his plan as he crept along. The screaming face ought to be next. He recalled it being lit with a flash of the brightest light, a light that could give him away. But if he kept to his right, flat up against the passage wall, he ought to be out of its beam, and Miss Ashton would probably reel back, momentarily blinded. In that instant after the light went out, with her pressed against the back of the passage, he might be able to duck by.

Air blasted his feet; he heard a cry right in front of him. He was so close to Miss Ashton, the air jet must have triggered once for both of them.

Forward, forward, easing along the floor of the passage, keeping as close as he dared to the presence before him. Soon, he thought, at any moment now, the screaming face will pounce. The flooring creaked. There was the sigh of a feathered breath.

Then, bam! The blinding light, the face, the wild scream! Tom threw himself against the right hand wall, twisting, darting silently by and on into the passage.

He went quickly now. Aunt Mary would be just ahead. Bats danced in his hair.

Not far now. The witch was close, the blue glow of her light just a few steps away. There was a shifting blackness in front of him. "Aunt Mary," he whispered. He caught up with her at the witch. "It's me Tom."

There was a scent of lilacs, a brush of cloth. He took Aunt Mary's sleeve. "Watch out for that Miss Ashton, she . . ."

A hand gripped his wrist like a clamp. A sharp breath hissed between thin, hard lips, and a terrible fear leaped within him as the blue light revealed the cold hard features of Miss Ashton where Aunt Mary's kindly face should be.

She growled like a cat. "You little—"

Her hand flew up. Cold steel flashed blue in the witch's light.

Tom's response was a reflex action.

He reached out his foot and stamped where the witch's treadle ought to be. The witch screeched and leaped. Tom yanked away. Miss Ashton went twisting down, hit the wall, the floor, groaned, and then sighed.

The sirening and strobing ambulance seemed a commonplace thing on the midway, its usual thunder stolen by the surroundings. The attendants, white-capped and jacketed, bundled their load out of the House of Horrors. The mound under the sheet seemed strangely small and fragile for the once bristling Miss Ashton.

There were fragments of conversation. "... must have fallen right on her own knife ... what was she *doing* in there? ..."

The boys stood on either side of Aunt Mary like guards. Tom tugged at her arm. "How did Miss Ashton get ahead of you in the passage?"

Her nervous voice pattered like a soft rain. "I knew she was following me. That's why I ducked into that haunted place—to get away. As soon as I got inside the entrance I stood back to let her go by me. *I can take care of myself. . . .*"

There was a multitude of questions.

The doctor was saying to a policeman: "I don't understand it. You can see that she fell on the knife—her hand was still gripping it. But it was a shallow wound, not normally a fatal one. . . ."

Aunt Mary touched his sleeve. "You'd better have a close look at that blade. I think you'll find something on it, something bad, some coating that shouldn't be there." She handed over the saxophone mouthpiece which she had in her purse, still carefully wrapped in its plastic bag. "And you'd better have a look at this, too."

She paused a moment, and added, "You all know me. You know where you can find me. My legs are shaking. I think I need a good lie down."

The policeman hesitated, then slowly nodded.

They walked Aunt Mary home.

And it was strange, Tom thought, how little magic there was in the streets this night at two o'clock in the morning.

UNSOLVED

by
C. R. Wylie, Jr.

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the April issue.

Clark, Jones, Morgan, and Smith are four men whose occupation are butcher, druggist, grocer, and policeman, though not necessarily respectively.

Clark and Jones are neighbors and take turns driving each other to work.

Jones makes more money than Morgan.

Clark beats Smith regularly at bowling.

The butcher always walks to work.

The policeman does not live near the druggist.

The only time the grocer and the policeman ever met was when the policeman arrested the grocer for speeding.

The policeman makes more money than the druggist or the grocer.

What is each man's occupation?

See page 148 for the solution to the February puzzle.

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FICTION.

Body Chemistry

by George Ingersoll



Illustration by Steve Long

88

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Flashing blue lights generally denote trouble of some sort for somebody, so I was curious when I saw flashing blue lights the other night. Of course in our little town the trouble is likely to be nothing worse than getting picked up on radar passing the elementary school at ten miles over the speed limit, so I wasn't all that curious. But then I didn't realize I was looking at a murder.

It was close to midnight. The boss had fallen asleep watching a Red Sox game on the little TV in the bedroom. I was reading when Silly started winding around my ankles. Silly is really Silhouette, an all-black tomcat who adopted us. The boss calls him that because that's what he becomes when his eyes are closed, which is most of the time. When he wants out, one ignores him at one's peril, so I got up and headed for the kitchen door, hoping he'd stay away from the neighbor's yard. She's a birder, and unjustly regards him as the Attila the Hun of the bird world. He's really a squirrel and rabbit specialist.

From the kitchen window I spotted the flashing blue lights over at That Place. A few years ago one of the big names in electronics built a new plant out here. A local builder figured that we were due to become Sil-

icon Valley East, and put up a fancy development to accommodate the anticipated influx. It has a name, but the crusty old Swamp Yankees around here refuse to use it; to them it's That Place. One corner of it is about a quarter mile from here, across a feedlot, and that's where I saw the lights. I went for the binoculars. (No, we don't spy on the neighbors; the boss uses them to find out whether the mail has come before hiking all the way down to the mailbox.)

The cruiser was pulled into a driveway, the lights were on in the garage, and people were milling about. When, after five minutes or so, no shots had been fired, nor anyone dragged forth in cuffs, I went to bed, resolving to ask Bob about it.

Bob Stein is a lieutenant in the state police, and one of the first few friends we made when we moved back here, after I retired. We'd met when he got me involved in one of his cases as a consultant. Bob's smart, and I guess he's a good cop, but he has one eccentricity. He was a World War II fighter jock and never quite outgrew it; he's likely to go all-navy on you without warning. He's a recent widower, and a frequent and welcome visitor at our house. Bob might know about the lights.

By morning I'd nearly forgot-

ten when it came over the local news. "Donald Marsh, executive at local plant, found dead in garage laboratory. Police investigating . . . blah, blah . . ." That probably explained the lights. Now I'd surely have to ask Bob about it. I did when he dropped by later that day.

"Ben," he said, "you're nosier than that tomcat of yours. Yeah, the lights were at Marsh's. Your locals called us in because they have no forensic lab, and the captain called me because he knows I live in this town and would be closest at that time of night. We're still looking under all the rocks."

"What happened?" asked the boss.

"You know that I'm not permitted to discuss a case that's under investigation, Dot. I'll give you what's common knowledge. Marsh was an industrial chemist at the electronics plant. He's generally thought to be independently wealthy, over and above his salary, which is about twice that of your garden-variety police lieutenant. I'd call him an eccentric and recluse; recluse because he's been deaf since birth and has no social life, eccentric because he does nothing but work. He had their garage extended and fitted the new part out as a laboratory. That's where he was when he wasn't at the plant or eating or

sleeping . . . out there working.

"We got the plant manager out of the sack last night, and he told us that Marsh was highly regarded. Because of his handicap he didn't run a department, but they gave him carte blanche otherwise. He did a lot of his work at home, and he turned in a steady stream of winning techniques and processes for them."

Bob paused. "I never realized that electronics involved all that much chemistry, but they told me that if you're into chips and microcircuitry it does."

He rose. "I'm meeting our lab team over there in ten minutes. We're going to give the place a thorough going-over. You should see it . . . looks like something out of a low-budget sci-fi film." And that was the last we saw of Robert until the following Friday, a week later.

I was down in the cellar in my shop, repairing screens. Somebody (I think it was Alexander King) said that anyone who owns his own house deserves it. He knew what he was talking about. The boss thumped heavily on the floor; that's our signal for "Now hear this hear this . . . surface surface!" Bob was on the phone.

"Morning, Ben. Airedale to Black Shoe." I told you he goes all-navy on you sometimes.

That's navy for a flight officer addressing a ship's officer.

"Go ahead, Airedale. Why aren't you working?"

"I *am* working; hence the call. Okay if I drop over later?"

I asked him since when did he need an invitation, and went to find the boss to tell her that if she hung around we might hear more about the Marsh matter.

Late morning Bob came chugging up the drive and slumped down into what's become his place at the kitchen table. He began without preamble. "We've been on this Marsh thing for a week now, and we've got zip. I've got the feeling that the captain is going to take me off it and treat it as an accident, so I guess I can tell you about it.

"Mrs. Marsh had two couples from the plant there that night. Marsh waved to them from the garage window when they arrived but did not come in, which was normal and expected. About eleven fifteen they prepared to leave, and Mrs. Marsh went out to drag him in for good nights. Seconds later she came running back in, screaming that he was dead, and something about gas. The two men say they thought she meant gasoline fumes and started out there, but she got semi-hysterical, and tried to hold them back. They say they

knew she'd been a nurse and finally took her word for it that he was dead. They settled for opening all the doors and called your locals. That's when you saw the lights.

"When I arrived, I found Marsh slumped over his bench, surrounded by a whole array of glassware and lab stuff I didn't understand. There was still a horrendous stench in the air, despite the open doors, but your local people had been in and out and said it hadn't bothered them. One of the guys in the ambulance crew that took him away said that it smelled like carbon disulfide to him. I had the place sealed until we could get some kind of handle on what was happening. It's still sealed . . . nothing has moved in or out.

"The M.E.'s office got back to us pretty quick. They say Marsh died from carbon monoxide . . . inhaling the stuff. I asked them about the alleged carbon disulfide smell and was told that, in its commercial form, it's a liquid with a strong rotten-egg odor . . . unpleasant but not lethal. I had to admit this matched what I'd smelled myself. So I went back to that garage with some experts.

"Turns out that Marsh *was* fooling with carbon disulfide . . . there was a big beaker of it on his bench. That

seems to account for the smell, but not the death because we can't explain the carbon monoxide. Mrs. Marsh's sports car was in the garage, but it certainly wasn't running, and the keys were in the house. And anyone who isn't fresh off the boat from Mars knows you just don't run an engine in a closed space.

"I also found out that carbon monoxide is a lethal ingredient in one kind of heating and illuminating gas, but the Marsh house has bottled gas and there's no carbon monoxide in that. So, until we have an explanation for the carbon monoxide, we don't know which way to go."

"Bizarre!" said the boss. "Was the car's engine warm?"

"Dot," he said, "let me know if you get tired of darning Ben's socks. We could use you. We simply don't know whether it was warm. Carbon monoxide was not even suspected until the next day. The car was in another part of the garage, and nobody thought to check it. One thing's for sure, though. Marsh didn't start the car, run it long enough to gas himself, shut it off, dispose of the key, and then drop dead. That seems to rule out suicide."

"How about your basic stock number AD1895 mysterious intruder?" I asked. "Any footprints in the flower beds?"

Bob looked scornful. "How long has it been since you were checked, Ben? If you can explain how this intruder could drive up their driveway, drill a hole through the garage door, hook a hose to his exhaust, pump the place full of carbon monoxide, and then take off, all without being noticed, then maybe I'll start to take him seriously."

He turned to the boss. "Dorothy, you're always zapping us with English lit . . . tell him about Occam's Razor."

She looked as startled as I did puzzled. "Robert," she said, "I didn't know you cared!" Then she smiled that sweet, sweet smile I've learned to beware. "Thought you had me, huh?" She turned to me. "I believe what the professor here is trying to explain is the most familiar embodiment of the principle he named: in a complex situation, the simplest explanation generally turns out to be the correct one." Bob just sat there, looking smug. Finally he resumed.

"You know that, in any case of unnatural death, the family gets looked at first. In Marsh's case the wife is his only family, and she got looked at. They met when he was a patient in one of the city hospitals. She was a third shift nurse. She's about half his age, cute as a button.

She says that while he was there they 'communicated' and it took. The nursing supervisor has a slightly different version. That supervisor is one tough, cynical, compassionate old gal. She's seen it all, and she says, flatly, that Mrs. Marsh married him for his money. I get the impression, talking with Mrs. Marsh, that she was just about down to nail-biting, out here in the boonies with no social life and a deaf, workaholic husband, but that's just an impression.

"Anyway, the captain appears ready to write it off as an accident." He paused again. "And, if you believe that, let's talk about a slightly used elephant I can get you cheap. Low mileage... very clean... only ridden on Sundays." He must have sensed our surprise at this uncharacteristic outburst; and he broke the slight tension. He glanced at his watch. "Twelve hundred sixteen hours," he announced.

"Yardarm!" I observed, heading for the box.

"Beer!" sighed the boss, feigning disgust. I noted that she produced three glasses.

After a suitable interval, I picked up the conversation from where Bob had let it drop. "Why do you think it wasn't an accident?"

"If Marsh couldn't have gassed

himself deliberately, by running his wife's car, he sure as hell couldn't have done it accidentally. So what does that leave you? Our lab people say that he couldn't have generated carbon monoxide, accidentally or otherwise, from the chemicals and apparatus he was working with when he died. He could have done it if he worked at it, with what was there, but he sure wasn't set up for it that night."

"Robert," I said, "you seem to have painted yourself into a corner. If you rule out suicide and accident and an intruder, that only leaves the five in the house and they alibi each other, since they were continuously together from the time Marsh waved at them until he was found dead."

"You know, Ben, that's just what the captain said, only not so politely. He reluctantly agreed that I could go on working on the case this weekend. I've got bupkis, and about sixty hours to turn that around. I thought you might be able to help again. How'd you like to have a look at that garage?"

It was borne in upon me that I'd been set up. The boss had seen it coming. I could tell because she was wearing her little "I could have told you if you'd asked" smile. Bless her heart!

"Robert," I asked, "why are you conning me? You had your experts examine that place, and they came up dry. I'm no chemist, just an old retired engineer. What do you expect me to find that they couldn't?"

"Frankly, I don't know. If I did, I wouldn't be asking, would I? I'm convinced that somehow a man was murdered in that garage, and it's a technical kind of place. You do that technical schtick . . . pretty good. How about it?"

The boss decided the issue. "Go ahead, Sancho Panza," she said. "The mule's parked out back. I was going to bake a cake this afternoon anyway. By the time you and the don here get done playing cop, it'll be ready."

"Foul!" I grumbled. "Cervantes ain't English lit."

"Hon," she said, "we had a professor who preached that Hispanics are as equal as anyone long before the government discovered it. Now go!" We went.

Robert had been correct about that garage cum lab. It was full of a bewildering array of glassware and electrical apparatus. A personal computer was perched in one corner, and books and magazines were everywhere. I stood and looked around for a while, with no idea what I was looking for. "Wow! Looks as though he was running his own distillery. Robert, if I'm

supposed to look this place over I'm going to have to handle things."

"Anything you want. Officially, we're finished here. Just look at this place! If Marsh was a chemist, what did he want with all this electrical junk?"

"I'm no chemist, but I can answer that one. Most of the spooks today's chemists are chasing are so quick and elusive that they can only be tracked by their electrical footprints. What you call 'electrical junk' is measuring equipment. The days when Holmes added two drops of something to a flask, held it to the light, and watched it turn blood-red are long gone. It's not done that way any more."

I went on a long, slow prowl. I didn't try to comprehend the glassware; I know my limitations. I knew the electrical apparatus better. I was looking for anomalies . . . something not kosher. I went through it all. I checked the contents of all the storage cabinets; nothing had "clue" stenciled on it. Robert was watching in silence and, I think, with mounting disappointment. I prowled and poked, fruitlessly, for the better part of an hour. Finally I walked back to my silent friend.

"Bob, you can't say I didn't warn you. The only rabbit I've got from this particular hat is unwell. He's thin and sickly,

and may well wither and disappear at the first hard look."

"You've got something! What have you got?"

"I've got a thing that's out of place here . . . it just doesn't fit. It may be perfectly innocent; I'll leave the explanations to you people."

"Just show it to me!"

I pulled one of the electrical gadgets from behind a stack of magazines on the lower shelf of the bench, where it had been half hidden. "What did your lab people have to say about this?"

"Nothing, as far as I can recall. They picked it up, looked at it the way you did, shrugged, and put it back."

"Okay . . . I'll tell you what it looks like to me, and why it doesn't fit." The gadget was a piece of perforated pegboard stock about the size of a paperback book. Attached to one end was a metal can, cigarette box size, with protruding electrical terminals. Mounted on the other end was a pair of metal cylinders, each the size of my thumb. The whole affair was interconnected by a mess of wires, with a little nine volt transistor battery insinuated amongst them. A few of the wires dangled off the end, terminating in alligator clips, small metal editions of the spring clothespin.

"This," I said, pointing to the metal can, "is the radio receiver

from an electric garage door opener. There is no way Marsh needed this in his work, and there's no garage door opener in this garage."

"How do you know that?" asked Bob. Always the cop.

"I have one just like it in my garage. Go along with me for a moment."

"Go, man."

"These two metal cylinders are relays . . . they have electrical contacts inside, and they appear to be hooked up so as to open and close those contacts in response to signals from the radio receiver. If I have this figured out right, I should be able to stimulate that radio signal by shorting across these two little pins. You won't see anything happen, but if you listen very carefully, you might be able to hear a very faint click." I laid the blade of my pocket-knife across the two pins, and sure enough, we heard the tiniest, barely audible click.

"Very interesting," said Bob, "but so what?"

"I'm not sure 'what' yet, but I'm beginning to suspect. There's a little pocket-sized electrical tester here, and I want you to give me about ten minutes alone with this thing, to check it out. Go hone your handcuffs or something for a little while, huh?" He grunted something and departed.

Promptly, ten minutes later, he was back. "Time's up. Whatcha got?"

"I have a fact and some wild speculation," I told him. "The art of hot-wiring a car is no secret. I even did it to my own car once, when I lost my keys. The fact is that this gadget, properly connected to a car, could do just that. Now for the wild speculation.

"Suppose that persons unknown wished Marsh gone, leaving his money behind. Further suppose said persons connected this thing to Mrs. Marsh's car. That could be done anywhere, at any time. The thing would be passive until the radio receiver was activated. The car is parked in the garage and the doors are closed. Now said persons never have to leave the house . . . only need to have the transmitter in pocket or purse . . . you know how small they are. Push the button and the car starts; Marsh would never have heard it. It idles. Carbon monoxide is odorless, and any slight smell of exhaust fumes would be masked by the carbon disulfide rotten-egg stench. Wait an hour, go to the garage, yank this thing loose from under the dash, and the car stops. Toss it out of sight, where we found it, and 'discover' the body. And this little beauty was supposed to go un-

noticed, among all the similar stuff lying around here."

Bob drew a deep breath and let it out slowly while he thought all that over. "Ben, it's a possible bingo. Maybe a lonesome nurse has a friend who's handy with a soldering gun. Let us go and get some cake, after which I have work to do." He picked the thing off the bench and we went home.

Time tends to pass slowly when you're waiting for something to happen. By late afternoon the next Wednesday the boss and I were convinced that Bob would not appear that day. We were sharing a congenial martini before dinner when, bigod!, we heard his noisy old compact laboring up the driveway.

"Either Bob has put one over the left-field fence, or he struck out," said the boss.

"I'd better mix another few martinis; either way, he'll probably be able to use a mild belt."

Robert wasn't fully through the door before we got the word.

"Lieutenant Stein to COM-SIXPAC: It's a bingo, Ben. We've got 'em!"

"Great. Who's 'them'?"

"Marsh's wife and the husband half of one of the couples who were there that night."

"Tell all!"

"I will, but first, as us radio types say, a brief commercial

message from my sponsor." With a grin he laid an envelope in front of me. It held a check. "You just earned another consultant's fee."

"Robert, you know I never contracted for this in the first place. I'm surprised the captain didn't have you keelhaunched for bringing in an unauthorized civilian. This goes back to your Fund, like the last time. Now for God's sake tell us what happened before we plot!"

"Okay, okay . . . I went back to the barracks and got hold of the tech who services all our electronics. He came up with a transmitter that could work the thing. Then I talked to one of our people who knows cars. When I asked him if he could hot-wire a car he looked at me like I'd just asked Columbus if he could row a boat. He looked the thing over and figured out which wires went to what; then the two of us went back there, and it took him maybe five minutes to get it clipped into place. We went outside, pushed the button on the transmitter, and when we went back in, the car was idling. He yanked the thing loose, clips and all, in one motion, and the car stopped.

"I'll say this for the captain, when he gets turned around, he gets turned around. He gave me some extra help and we got to work. After that it was straight

police routine. We got a list of all the dealers in the area that sell that brand of garage door opener, and we hit every one. Turns out those things don't exactly sell like Cabbage Patch Kids. Only twelve were sold over the counter in the last thirty days. We didn't think the person we were after would have bought it by mail, for obvious reasons. Eleven of the twelve were bought on credit cards and were traceable; none went to people we felt were viable suspects. One was sold, for cash, in a store about forty miles from here. The proprietor remembered the sale and was able to give us a fair description of the buyer.

"Meanwhile, we'd been running checks on the two couples who were at Marsh's that night. Turned out one of the guys is an electronic engineer at the plant . . . name of Tait. And whattaya know? He fit the description of the anonymous buyer of the garage door opener. Monday, while Tait was working and his wife was shopping, a guy tried to deliver a package at Tait's. He happened to be one of us, and he happened to look in their garage door windows. If they have a garage door opener, it isn't installed.

"When the captain heard all this he said, 'Hit the motels,' but I was ahead of him that

time. I'd reasoned with the head of security at the plant, and we had a print of Tait's badge photo. I figured Mrs. Marsh is sufficiently spectacular so that we could get by with a description of her. So we hit the motels.

"Motel operators are understandably cagey about discussing their guests, especially the operators who charge a full day's rate for rooms they rent four times a day, but we find they are usually amenable to a little friendly persuasion. We finally hit the right one, and got a positive I.D. on Tait's photo and Mrs. Marsh's description. Sure enough, they'd been playing house for some little time. Bingo!"

The boss was dubious. She turned the ray on him. She knows how to do that. "Sounds promising, Robert, but isn't it pretty circumstantial? When 'playing house' gets to be a capital felony, I'd hate to pay the state's electric bill. Maybe Tait simply forgot about the garage door opener he bought, and left it in his other pants. Isn't all this pretty thin for a bingo?"

Bob looked so smug I could have kicked him. I knew he'd been saving something.

"Dot," he said, while minutely examining a cuticle, "I'm sure you know about comparison microscopes, the things our lab uses to match bullets to guns. We used one to check the solder joints on that gadget against the tip of Tait's soldering gun in his toolbox. They match. We also found scratches on some of the ignition wiring in the car that are hard to explain except by contact with alligator clips. They were on a part of the wiring we never touched during our test."

"I will subside, Robert," murmured the boss. "Death sends a radiogram."

"More English lit, Dot?"

"Um . . . Sandburg this time. Bob, have you really got them? I mean, cold?"

"The captain had them in for questioning. When they were confronted with what we had, they broke. Otherwise you don't think the captain would have signed that check, do you?"

"Bob," she said, "I'm amazed by the efficacy of what you call 'police routine.'"

He turned to me. "Efficacy? Is that good?"

"COMSIXPAC to Airedale: For 'efficacy' read WELL DONE."

FICTION

Love at Second Sight

by Patricia Moyes



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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Of course the ways of Fate are utterly illogical: otherwise, what possible excuse could Providence have had for picking Bridie Donovan, of all people, on whom to bestow the priceless gift of prophetic dreams? And not just any old prophetic dreams, mind you, but the first three horses in the Derby—one, two, three, just like that.

When you consider the number of earnest and hardworking sportsmen in Dublin, when you think of the patient hours they spend studying form, and the wear and tear to their vocal chords as they discuss the merits of various runners in bars all up and down the city, it makes you weep to think of such an unparalleled blessing being thrown away on a chit of a girl, who'd never so much as bet sixpence on a raffle ticket.

She was a pretty enough little thing, to be sure, with her black hair and blue eyes and creamy skin. I'd often thought so, in a vague sort of way, since she came to work in the office. Perhaps I'd better explain about the office. It's a small import-export firm that I inherited from my father a couple of years ago, much to the disgust of several uncles, who considered that at twenty-five I wasn't capable of running a bath, let alone a business.

I think I can say I proved them wrong. I'm no financial genius, but I managed to keep the place ticking over, and none of the customers complained. There were just the five of us in the office. Me, in my private room, signing letters and directing policy, which generally meant doing the crossword puzzle and studying form. My three clerks—Murphy, Regan, and O'Grady—in the big office where the real work was done. And Bridie, flitting in and out with cups of tea from the little cubicle where she sat with her typewriter. It was a nice, cosy little setup, and we all enjoyed it.

Now, I'm not pretending that everything I'm going to tell you is first-hand because of course I wasn't there for all of it—in fact, as you'll see, I don't really come into the story at all. But I've heard it told so often that I feel I can take a little poetic license. So here goes.

Well, it was on the morning of Derby Day, and we were all hard at work. I had the *Irish Times and Sporting Life* out on my desk, and I was putting in some hours of concentrated study. Next door, Murphy, Regan, and O'Grady had just about every newspaper in Dublin between them, and Regan had brought his form book. They hadn't reached the arguing stage: it was more like the quiet, reverent atmosphere you get at the start of a prayer meeting. They

didn't even look up when Bridie came in. Nor did they react when she said, as she hung up her coat, "I had the strangest dream last night, so I did."

Bridie wasn't worried about getting no answer. She was used to talking to herself on Big Race days. So as she combed her hair and powdered her nose and took the cover off her typewriter, she prattled gaily on.

"I was in this great fairground, see, like the one my auntie took me to in Connemara, with coconut shies and swings and bounce-the-lady-out-of-bed and all of it. But the one thing I'd set my heart on—in my dream, this is—was to ride on the roundabout. You never saw such hobbyhorses, all painted in red and blue and gold and yellow, with manes made of real horsehair and real eyes that were alive and tails that swished so that they'd have taken the flies off the creatures, if there'd been any flies. Beside the roundabout was a funny little man, like a pixie. So I asked him how much was it for a ride, as I hadn't but sixpence in my pocket. And he said, 'For you, Bridie Donovan, it's nothing at all. Now, which horse do you fancy?' I said it was all the same to me, and he said, 'Surely you'll be wanting the winner?'"

At the word "winner," Murphy did look up for a moment. He's a little man with red hair and a sharp face, like a weasel. "What's this about a winner?" he asked.

"It's nothing at all, only Bridie's nonsense," said Regan, who's tall and broad and dark as the devil.

"You may call it nonsense, Mr. Regan," said Bridie, with spirit, "but indeed he did give me the winner. And the next two after it."

"What do you mean, gave you the winner?" O'Grady demanded. O'Grady's a plump man in his forties, with soft fair hair like a baby's, and going bald fast.

Bridie closed her eyes. "I can hear him now," she said. "He said, 'The first is red as roses, and the second is yellow as corn, and the third is blue as the sea. The first is from the fire, and the second is from the earth, and the third is from the air.'"

There was a silence. Then O'Grady said, "Would you say all that over again?"

Bridie said it again.

"Well, it's a remarkable thing," said O'Grady. "I don't know if you fellows realize that there's a horse called Flame Flower running today, and another called Cornstalk, and a third by the name of Blue Gull."

"Sure, and none of them in the least interesting," said Murphy.

"Cornstalk might be worth a small investment, if the price were right," said Regan. "I suppose your friend didn't give you the SP by any chance?"

There was a general laugh at this, but finally O'Grady said, "I'll have a tanner each way on each of them, just for luck. You never can tell."

I don't need to tell you, of course, that Flame Flower romped home at 20-1, with Cornstalk second at 100-8, and Blue Gull third at 7-2. O'Grady netted over fourteen bob profit on his six tanners, although he went down the drain with the rest of us on the favorite. However, as you can imagine, it was not the amount won that caused the sensation but the fact that Bridie should turn out to have these sensational powers, which had clearly been bestowed by heaven for the purpose of making the fortunes of Messrs. O'Grady, Murphy, and Regan.

That evening, after the office, the three of them took Bridie out to a public house and bought her a bottle of Guinness—the first time such a thing had happened in all her nineteen years, for she lived with an aunt who was teetotal to a fault.

"Now, Bridie," said O'Grady, "you're to go to sleep tonight with a pencil and paper under your pillow and in the morning you're to write down what you've dreamt. Every detail, mind. And you're to tell nobody but us three."

"You want to find that fairground man again," Murphy added. "And when you do, take some trouble to cultivate him. Wish him good morning, or good evening, as may be appropriate, and thank him for his help."

"You might tell him we're sorry we didn't take his first message more seriously," said Regan. "I wouldn't like him to think we'd ignored him, and him taking all that trouble."

Well, Bridie found herself back in the fairground that night in her dreams, and she met the little attendant, who was as civil as could be, and she gave him Regan's message, which seemed to please him. He took her over to the hoop-la stall, and the first ring she threw encircled a diamond brooch made in the shape of a dart. O'Grady, Regan, and Murphy scraped up a fiver between them to put on Bright Arrow in the three thirty, and netted fifty quid.

The next night the fairground attendant took her to the side-shows and pointed out a magnificent lion in a small cage. The syndicate put the whole of the kitty on Noble Captive in the four

o'clock, which came in at three to one, so that meant fifty quid for each of them—although Murphy, who was acting as treasurer, advised them to leave it all with him for the next day's investment.

How long this would have gone on nobody knows because on the third day the syndicate made their big mistake. They grew too greedy, and forgot their manners.

Regan started it by demanding that Bridie ask the man for the starting prices of the horses he gave them. Murphy went further, and said she should tell him that they wanted odds of at least ten to one on all his selections. O'Grady added that the first time he'd given them the second and third as well, and that he thought the service was slipping.

That night Bridie, being an honest and straightforward girl, repeated to the fairground attendant what the trio had said. The little man suddenly stopped smiling.

"Oh, so that's the way of it, is it?" he said. "And what are you getting out of all this, Bridie Donovan?"

"Nothing," says Bridie.

"Not even a tanner to keep for yourself?"

"Not a thing," says Bridie.

"Is that so?" says the man. "Well, you shall. I've got something good for your friends tonight. Step this way."

The following morning, Bridie turned up with her notebook as usual, and the syndicate could see that there were several pages of it closely written in Bridie's clear hand. Their spirits rose.

"Come on now, my dear," said Murphy. "Did you tell him what we said?"

"I did that," said Bridie demurely, "and he said he had a good thing for you."

"Let's have it, then," said Regan.

Bridie consulted her notes. "Last night," she said, "he took me to the big circus tent. There was a beautiful lady in pink tights riding round the ring on two horses, standing up with one foot on each of them. One of the horses was a chestnut, and the other was a big black creature. The lady had a sash on her, with the name Joan embroidered on it in red."

"Now there's a funny thing," said Murphy. "There doesn't seem to be any sort of a horse running with a name to fit to that."

"Then," Bridie went on, "the lady climbed down and kissed the black horse and pinned a red rose on its bridle. But the chestnut trotted off to the stables, where there was a little fat donkey nib-

bling away at some hay. The donkey didn't seem to realize that he wasn't getting his fair share because the chestnut was stealing all the hay from the other side of the manger."

"That's a very odd dream," said O'Grady, studying the lists of runners. "I can't see a horse to fit that."

"Last of all," said Bridie, "the donkey went off to where the black horse was, and he brayed at the top of his lungs, so that all the animals came running. They all started kicking the black horse, and biting it . . . and then I woke up."

"I make no sense of that at all," said Regan. "You'd better tell your man not to set us such riddles in future. We want the names quite clearly."

"There's one name that's clear, and that's Joan," said O'Grady. Then he looked at Murphy, and said, "Your wife's called Joan, isn't she, Murphy?" And then he looked at Regan, the big black fellow, and most pointedly he looked at the red rose that Regan wore in his buttonhole.

At that, Murphy gave a sort of howl. "So that's the way of it, is it?" he yelled, rushing at Regan. "Riding in double harness, is she, and kissing you and giving you roses!"

"Why couldn't you keep your big useless mouth shut?" Regan bellowed at O'Grady. "You're the fat donkey, all right!"

"So I'm the donkey, am I?" shouted O'Grady to Murphy. "In that case, what about the hay you're stealing from my manger? Who made you treasurer anyway?"

Well, as you can imagine, by this time there was a fine fight going on, with everyone at everyone else's throat, and swearing and shouting and eyes being blacked and windows broken. When it got too loud, I thought I'd better take a hand, so I came out of my office.

I suppose I must have seen the three men because it was difficult to miss them, but frankly I didn't notice. What I did see was Bridie, cowering up in a corner, terrified and crying, and I realized quite suddenly that here was the girl I'd been waiting for all my life.

"You're fired, all of you!" I shouted to Murphy, Regan, and O'Grady. They didn't hear me, of course. They were throwing chairs by then. I walked over to Bridie and picked her up in my arms and carried her out of the office.

We've been married nearly a year now, and it's coming up to Derby Day again. I did mention it in passing to Bridie, but she just smiled and told me she didn't dream at all these days. Perhaps it's just as well.

FICTION

Kelso's Nightmare

by Malcolm
McClintick

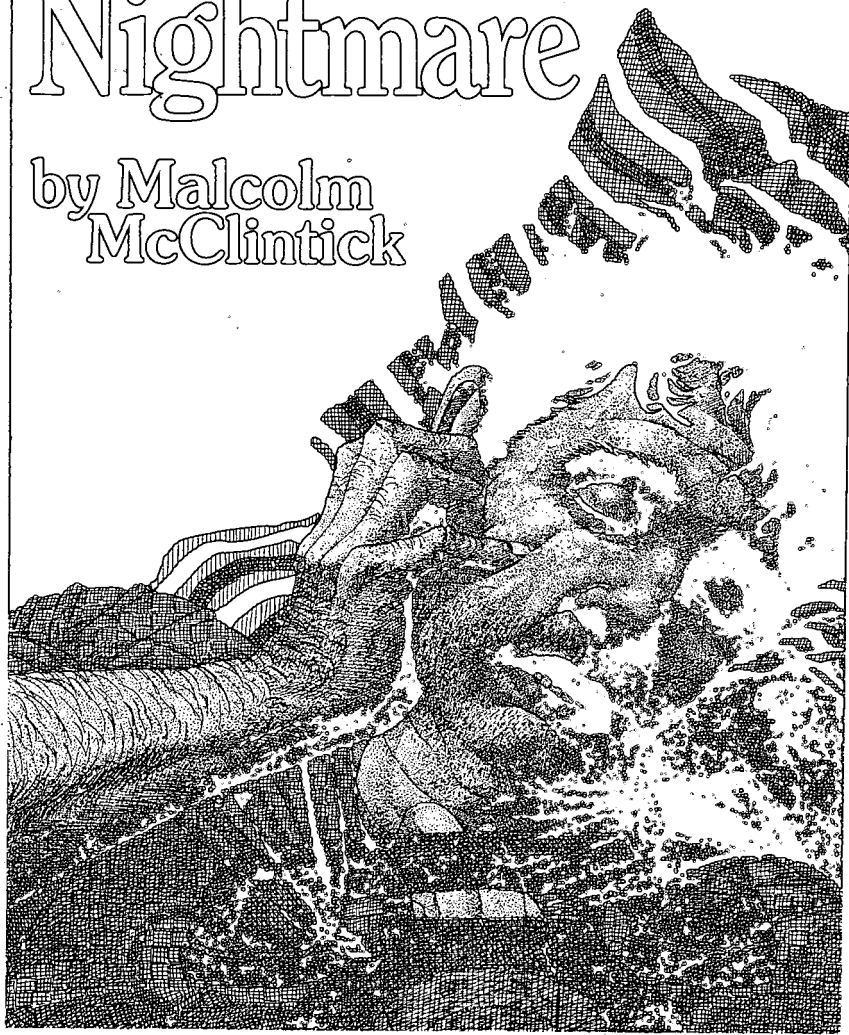


Illustration by Janet Aulisio

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In his dream the telephone was ringing. Kelso could not see, only hear and feel. Darkness crowded around him like black wool, threatening to suffocate him.

The phone continued to ring and he sweated, trying to breathe. He knew that if he answered it, he would die. Its ring became louder, filling his head till he wanted to scream.

Kelso awoke. He lay on his back, mouth open, undershirt soaked. The phone was ringing.

For a moment the nightmare returned, even in wakefulness, sending wave after wave of chills over his face and arms and back; then he flung aside the sheet, got up, and stumbled towards the phone, reaching for the wall switch to blind himself with the overhead light.

"Shake it off, shake it off," he told himself. "Only a dream. Shake it off." Nevertheless, when he lifted the receiver another series of chills hit him, and his voice was hoarse when he said gruffly: "Hello?"

"George?"

Susan Overstreet's voice, sounding uncertain and alarmed.

"Susan? What's the matter?"

"George, I just had a terrible dream. Something awful happened to you. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Kelso frowned at his wristwatch, which he wore

even in bed. "You woke me up at two A.M. to tell me about a dream?"

"I'm sorry. I just had this feeling. It was about telephones. I don't know... are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine. Go back to sleep."

"Okay, if you're sure. George? I love you..."

This always embarrassed Kelso. He sighed. "Yeah. Me, too."

"Night."

"G'night."

He hung up. Before his hand let go, the phone rang again, so loudly that he jumped. He jerked the receiver to his ear.

"Yes?"

"Kelso? Meyer here."

"Oh. Meyer."

"You sound weird."

"It's two A.M. What do you expect?"

"We're on call, remember?"

Kelso moaned.

"Probable homicide over on Chesterfield Lane." Meyer gave an address. "Meet me there soon as you can."

"Okay." The overhead light hurt his eyes. It was cold in the room; he stood shivering in his underwear, his bare feet on the hardwood boards.

"Kelso? You awake? You know what's going on? You're not going back to the sack, are you?"

"I'll be there," he muttered,

and replaced the receiver. For a moment he glared at the phone, wondering if it would ring a third time, but it did not. He dressed hurriedly in corduroy jeans, oxford shirt, and crepe-soled shoes; then grabbed his lined jacket and gloves. He wanted coffee but there wasn't time.

Outside, flakes of snow wet his face. He lit his pipe and climbed into the little yellow VW Bug. As he drove through the quiet dark streets he was still unable to rid himself of his nightmare.

The house on Chesterfield Lane was old. Kelso parked the Beetle in front, behind a marked patrol car whose red lights were dark. No reason to disturb the neighbors. Beyond, he recognized the Buick of Dr. Paul from the coroner's office, and the crime lab van.

Snow was starting to stick on the lawns, which were olive drab in the eerie half-light produced by streetlamps reflecting off the low pinkish-gray clouds. Kelso followed a short cement walk up a sloping yard to the house, went up two steps onto a covered stoop, and rang the bell. Nothing happened, so he pulled open the storm door and used the brass knocker. The wooden door was opened in-

ward by a young uniformed cop Kelso recognized.

"Hello, Bieri."

"Hi, sergeant. The body's in there."

He sighed. So the homicide wasn't probable, but actual. Inside a short hallway he unzipped his jacket and removed his gloves, then stood with hands thrust into his pants pockets and blinked.

The place was overheated and smelled of furniture polish and perked coffee. The hall was thickly carpeted. In the ceiling a low-watt bulb cast a feeble light that failed to penetrate dark shadows in the corners, reminding him of his dream.

"Where?" he asked irritably.

Detective-Sergeant Meyer, short, thin, and bird-like, appeared in a side doorway, clad in his usual dark suit and tie, his expression as sullen as ever.

"Come in here, Kelso. What the hell took you so long?"

Kelso followed him through the door, into a large square living room with old fashioned high ceilings, faded wallpaper, and heavy furniture. A white-haired woman, tiny and frail, sat slumped down in an armchair, a nearby lamp glinting from the lenses of her gold-rimmed glasses. She wore a long flannel nightgown and tattered slippers.

Opposite her sat a balding

man, gnarled hands clutching the wooden armrests of his chair, clad in a wrinkled white shirt open at the collar, sleeves rolled up to reveal a large silver watch on one wrist, shiny black trousers, scuffed leather slippers with no socks. His bare ankles were white, and Kelso could see purplish-blue veins running in the jagged pattern of a shattered windshield. The man held onto a yellow wooden cane.

Near the door stood Dr. Paul, neat and trim, next to a second uniformed man, Officer Hawkins.

"This lady is Sarah Potter," Meyer said. "She lives here with her husband, Herbert Potter." He gestured with his thumb towards the balding man. "Mrs. Potter's brother, Arnold Anderson, came here yesterday for a three-day visit. He's in there, in the dining room. Dead."

Sarah Potter emitted a muffled sob and raised a hand to her mouth. Her husband looked dazed and said nothing. Kelso noticed that Potter stared directly ahead and seemed unaware of anything going on in the room.

"Is Mr. Potter sedated?" he asked.

Dr. Paul shook his head.

"Him?" Meyer shrugged.

"I didn't give him anything,"

Dr. Paul said.

"My husband's been deaf for

almost a year now," Sarah Potter said quietly, peering with huge watery blue eyes at Kelso. Her voice was reedy and quavering.

Meyer turned to peer at Herbert Potter and said in a loud, high voice: "IS THAT RIGHT, MR. POTTER? ARE YOU DEAF?"

Potter frowned slightly but said nothing.

"Poor thing," Mrs. Potter said. "Doctors don't know why. He ain't got a tumor or anything. His hearing started to go when the phone calls came. It's my mother, I told him. Mother's calling us." She looked frightened. "Now Mother's killed Arnold."

"The old lady's senile," Meyer stated.

Kelso grimaced, but Mrs. Potter appeared not to have heard.

"Be a little tactful, Meyer, can't you?"

"Huh?"

"I'll have a look at the body," Kelso said, frowning at Meyer, and went through an open doorway into the next room. Suddenly he remembered something and stepped back into the living room. "Who found the body?" he asked.

"Mrs. Potter," Meyer replied. "She called to report it."

Kelso nodded. Mrs. Potter gazed at him with wide blue

eyes and dabbed at a tear on her pale cheek. Kelso wondered if she found it easy to make tears. Huddled in her armchair, she looked frail and harmless. He looked at her husband. Potter stared vacantly past him and clung to the curved handle of his cane with both hands. Just above his fingers Kelso saw the small area where the old man's grip had worn the wood smooth over the years. He looked as harmless as his wife.

Kelso shrugged and entered the dining room.

It was the same size and shape as the living room, with two draped windows, a thick carpet, a hutch, and six chairs around a long black table. The smell of perked coffee was stronger; that must be the kitchen, through the next door.

Arnold Anderson lay on the floor between the table and the windows, on his back. Kelso went over to him and knelt down. He was about sixty, with none of the frail gauntness of his sister. He wore light blue silk pajamas with navy trim, very new and not cheap, and leather moccasins with fur lining, also new. Kelso saw a ring on the man's left hand, heavy and gold with an impressive diamond. The fingernails were well manicured. His stomach protruded even more than Kelso's, and his face had that

soft fullness seen in well-fed executives.

Something had made a bloody wound over his left eye. A paring knife had been buried to its bone handle in his chest. Blood had soaked a large area of his pajama top.

Kelso stood up and wiped at his forehead. It was too hot in the house, and he felt a kind of tension. Dr. Paul came in and spoke in soft professional tones:

"Someone struck him on the head with a heavy object before he died. Over his eye. It bled a lot, but Meyer hasn't found the weapon yet. The knife is in or near the heart. I'll wait until autopsy to say which, but I'd guess it's actually in. Death would've been within a few seconds. From the bloodstains and position of the body, I'd say he fell where he is when he was hit, then stabbed."

"When?"

"There's no rigor yet. The body hasn't cooled much, though it's fairly warm in this house. I'd say he died within the last hour or two."

"And you think it was the knife thrust that killed him?"

Dr. Paul nodded. "He's a healthy man. Probably the blow on the forehead dazed him."

"The knife—"

"Could have been inserted fairly easily while he lay there, not moving. Fairly easily."

"Either Mr. or Mrs. Potter could have handled it, in other words."

"So it would appear. But which?"

Kelso shrugged. "That's the question. Are they physically capable, either of them?"

"Sure." Dr. Paul nodded again. "Either of them. With a very sharp knife."

Kelso sighed. One of the crime lab technicians came in wearing blue coveralls and nodded at Kelso.

"How's it going, George?"

"I don't know. You guys have anything?"

"Nothing much. The knife handle's been wiped."

"Surprise, surprise," Kelso said, and went back to the living room.

A weird stillness cloaked the house, the hush that accompanies a snowfall in the early morning hours. These are the hours of death, Kelso thought. Somewhere, he'd read that. People were supposedly more prone to die between midnight and four A.M. Maybe not—but it had been so for Arnold Anderson.

The house had something else, too. Something Kelso did not understand and did not wish to define. An air, like mist, that kept reminding him of his nightmare. He noticed some-

thing and went back through the dining room to the kitchen. It was dark, illuminated only by the light from the dining room. Fumbling here and there, he found a coffee percolator on a counter, steaming and smelling good. He couldn't see the steam, it was too dark, but he could hear the gurgling noises.

On the gas range was a tea-kettle. The burner was off. He tapped the kettle with a finger and felt warmth.

Something strange here. Frowning, he made his way around the rest of the kitchen, probing in the dimness. He tried the wall switch, but apparently the light had burned out. He went through a side door to the hall, scouted it, and returned to the living room again.

There were no telephones in this house. Not downstairs, anyway.

Meyer, with a pad and pencil out, was questioning Mrs. Potter.

"My mother killed him," she said in her strange thin voice, eyes bulging behind the glasses lenses.

"I don't care about all that," Meyer snapped. "Just tell me when you found him."

"She killed him, Mr. Meyer. I'll tell you about it. Two years ago she was alive. My mother."

"I don't want to hear it," Meyer said.

"She was sick. Not in body, but in mind, and spirit. Or so we thought, Herbert and me. She'd telephone us in the wee hours, like a crazy person. She was eighty-one, maybe that's the reason. She'd say some man was after her. At first, Herbert would go over there. She only lived five blocks from here. But there was never any man after her."

"You said Herbert got up to have tea?" Meyer asked loudly.

"So then we ignored her. She'd call us up and we'd hang up on her. Oh, Lord." Mrs. Potter sniffed, then continued: "One night, a year ago, she called us at two in the morning. I answered it. 'Let it ring, Sarah,' Herbert tells me, but I picked it up. It was Mother. 'Come right now, Sarah,' she says. 'It's a man, a prowler, after me.' Then I hung up. She called again at three thirty and screamed that some man was getting her. I hung up on her again and we left the phone off the hook till morning. Then we went over there, after breakfast, and found her dead."

Meyer glared. "She'd been killed?"

"She died of a stroke. But fear done it to her. Her door was locked. I believe she imagined a prowler; and it scared her to death. If Herbert and me had gone to her . . ."

Meyer scribbled noisily in his notebook.

"Excuse me," Kelso said, removing his jacket, sweating. "Mrs. Potter, don't you have a telephone in the house?"

"Not any more. Not since the calls started."

"What calls, ma'am?"

"She calls us up every morning from her grave."

Kelso grimaced.

"That's crap," Meyer said disgustedly.

In his chair, Herbert Potter stared at a wall, wrapped in his own world.

"No." The old lady's voice shook. "It's true. At two A.M. and again at three thirty, just like on the night she died, our phone would ring, but there'd never be anybody there."

"Pranksters," Meyer muttered.

"Not pranksters. I had the phone removed, but the calls kept coming all the same."

"What?" Kelso asked.

"The calls kept coming. The phone rings, two and three thirty A.M., even without any phone. There's none in this house, but it rings, almost like it was coming from the walls. Even after they came and took out the phones, it rang. Poor Herbert's hearing started to go."

"Mrs. Potter—" Kelso tried.

"Herbert even disconnected

our doorbell, 'cause it sounded too much like the phone."

Meyer rolled his eyes ceiling-ward.

That explained the doorbell's not working, Kelso thought, and asked politely: "Has anyone checked your walls, ma'am?"

"Yes, sir. The phone company checked. Nothing. No phones, no bells. They even ripped out the phone jacks."

"And still you heard a phone ringing?"

"At two this morning she called us again," Mrs. Potter said gravely, and peered at a tiny watch on one skeletal wrist. "She'll call again in fifteen minutes, at three thirty."

"How did you call the police?" Meyer asked angrily.

"I went down to the corner pay phone, Mr. Meyer. The one in that pharmacy parking lot."

"Would you mind telling us how you found your brother's body, Mrs. Potter?" Kelso asked.

"I'll tell you." She darted a quick frown at Meyer, then returned her gaze to Kelso. "You ain't rude, like *him*."

"No, ma'am."

Meyer muttered something under his breath.

"Well," she said, "the phone rang at two A.M. I got up. It was coming from the walls, same as ever. The downstairs walls, right near the kitchen. Herbert was in the bathroom. He came out

and went downstairs with me, and he went into the kitchen to make tea."

"You decided to stay up for a while?"

"Yes, sir. We can't sleep between two and three thirty. We know it'll ring again. Poor Herbert can't hear nothing now, but still he wakes up and stays awake with me till it rings again, then we go back to bed."

"All right."

"Well, I was in the living room, reading a magazine. I heard my brother Arnold coming down the stairs, the phone must've woke him up. He came to visit yesterday." She wrinkled her nose and whispered something.

"Ma'am?"

"I say, he was rich, could've stayed in a hotel, but came here instead. Lives up in Chicago. Got every cent of Mother's estate when she passed on. Always *was* her favorite, even though me and Herbert sent her a birthday card and a Christmas card every year."

"I see."

"She just hated us, I guess, on account of us hanging up on her when she called in the wee hours."

"Yes, ma'am."

Mrs. Potter stared, seemingly confused.

"Arnold came downstairs?" Kelso prompted.

"Oh, yes. Well, I heard his footsteps in the hall. I heard the teakettle whistle. Herbert always has to have his tea while we wait for the second call. Then I heard him turn off the kettle."

"You heard the kettle whistle, and he turned it off?"

"Yes, sir."

"And this was after two. The phone, or the bell, had already rung?"

"It had."

"How many times?"

"Four or five. I don't know. Six maybe."

"You heard it."

"I heard it. I ain't crazy. It still scares me. No phone in this house, but still it rings. Somehow she calls, her in her grave, us with no phone. Oh, Lord, forgive us our sins!"

"What happened next?" Kelso asked quickly.

"Oh, Lord... I was in the living room, and I heard a shout. I got up and went to the dining room, and there was Arnold on the floor on his back, that knife in his chest." She closed her eyes tightly, opened them again, went on: "I went to the kitchen. Herbert was at the table, his back to me, sipping his tea. The overhead light had burned out, there was just the bit of light coming from the dining room. I was afraid I'd scare him, coming up behind him in the dark.

I went around to his front and, he can read my lips you know, I said, 'Herbert, Mother's gone and killed my brother.' He almost fainted. He ain't said a word since. He's in shock, most likely."

Kelso glanced at Dr. Paul, but the doctor shook his head slightly from side to side. He looked at his watch. Three twenty. It was like his nightmare. Phones ringing with no phone. Dead mothers calling up from the grave and then stabbing their sons. He shuddered, fighting off the sickening chills of his dream, which lurked just over his shoulder, waiting to consume him as soon as he was off his guard.

Meyer shut his notebook loudly and started pacing back and forth in front of Mrs. Potter, jabbing a thin finger angrily like a diminutive prosecuting attorney.

"All right, Mrs. Potter," he snapped, "I don't buy your story for one minute. Now I'll tell you exactly what happened here to-night."

"I don't—" Mrs. Potter began, wide-eyed, but Meyer cut her off loudly:

"Just be quiet and listen. You hated your brother, Arnold Anderson, because he inherited all your mother's money. He came barging in here yesterday, imposing on you and your hus-

band, flaunting his inheritance with his fancy silk pajamas and his diamond ring. You made up this bull about phones ringing in the walls at two and three thirty A.M. It's perfect—"

"Please, Mr. Meyer. I didn't make it up."

"It's Detective-Sergeant Meyer, and yes you did. It's *perfect* because your husband's deaf, so he can't corroborate you or contradict you. He can't deny the phone rings because he'd never hear it if it *did* ring. So you concocted this fantasy about your dead mother and phone calls, just to throw us off the track. In reality, you got up at two this morning and grabbed a knife, and while your deaf husband drank tea in the kitchen you stabbed your brother to death in the dining room."

"Oh, Lord."

"Probably you were going to figure some way to blame it on your husband."

"No—"

"And your husband never even heard Arnold cry out, because *he's deaf*."

Mrs. Potter leaned back in her chair and seemed to shrivel. She removed her gold-rimmed spectacles and rubbed at her sunken eyes with tiny childlike fists, her knuckles white.

Kelso's watch read three twenty-three.

Dead women don't return from

the grave to commit murder, he told himself, fighting off the nightmare. He knew this was true; yet he had to repeat it to himself.

Suddenly Herbert Potter groaned and stood up, tottering and supporting himself with his cane. "Toilet!" he rasped. He turned and began shuffling out of the room, into the hall.

"Herbert's got a weak bladder," Sarah Potter said rather forlornly.

Meyer scowled. "I'm going to have to read you your rights, Mrs. Potter. You know that, don't you?"

"Excuse me," Kelso said, and left the room.

It was three twenty-four.

Old Mr. Potter was tapping his way up the stairs, laboring upward with great effort. Kelso passed him and hurried up to the second floor. Partway down the hall he found the bathroom and went in, closed the door, and looked around.

After a moment or so he found what he'd been looking for: two insulated wires running down through a small hole in the floor just behind the toilet. He followed the wires upward; they led to a push-button taped to the back of the toilet tank.

Kelso found his pocketknife and cut the wires just at the hole. Someone banged on the

door and Herbert Potter's agonized voice cried out:

"Toilet! Toilet!"

"Sorry," Kelso murmured, emerging from the bathroom and then pausing to watch the old man enter. The door banged shut.

Kelso trotted downstairs and entered the living room again. It was three twenty-nine. Meyer, like a small bird of prey, was poised over Sarah Potter, who shrank back, terrified.

"Oh, leave her alone," Kelso said, and Meyer whirled to glower.

"What?"

"I said, leave her alone. *She* didn't do it."

"It's almost three thirty!" Mrs. Potter's voice broke. Her eyes were wide. "In fifteen seconds! Mother'll call us again!"

Dr. Paul looked interested. Officer Hawkins appeared bored. Meyer scowled furiously. Kelso waited.

If the phone rings, he thought...

"Now," Mrs. Potter said, cringing.

Silence.

Somewhere, in the house a clock ticked loudly.

"Maybe she couldn't find a phone booth," Meyer suggested.

"No one's calling this time," Kelso said. "It's all over."

"What are you babbling about, Kelso?"

There was a commotion out on the stairs. Kelso went to the hall door to watch as old Mr. Potter half-ran, half-fell down the steps, his cane clattering. At the bottom he made for the rear of the hall, heading towards the kitchen, shuffling rapidly.

"It's not the bell, Mr. Potter," Kelso said in a normal tone. "I cut the wires in the bathroom."

Mr. Potter stopped abruptly. Then, realizing his mistake, he started forward again uncertainly, tapping with his cane.

"It's finished, Mr. Potter," Kelso said. "Did you wear gloves? The crime lab might still find one of your prints on that knife when they get it out of the body and use the laser on it."

Potter halted, then turned slowly and gave Kelso a long, agonized look.

Meyer hurried up to Kelso.

"What the hell's going on, anyway? I thought he was deaf."

"Mr. Potter's not deaf," Kelso said softly. "His wife said the kitchen light was out when she went in there, and she said he could read lips. But how could he have read her lips in the dark?"

"Huh?"

"And she said she heard the teakettle whistle, then her husband turned it off. Mr. Potter was in a dark kitchen. If he's

deaf, how'd he hear the kettle whistle?"

"So what?"

"So he's not deaf. He bought a dry-cell battery and some wire, and hooked them up to the doorbell he'd removed, with a push-button hidden behind the toilet. He got up and rang the bell at two A.M., and again at three thirty A.M., the same times his wife's mother telephoned the night she died."

"Why?" Meyer asked. "Why would he do that?"

"To annoy his wife, play on her nerves, make her upset and afraid. He knew how she hated her brother, who'd inherited all their mother's money." Kelso looked at the old man. "You wanted that money for yourself, didn't you, Mr. Potter? You pretended to be deaf, so you could ignore the bell sounds and not have to confirm or deny their existence. It would all be up to your wife."

Potter's face was grim.

"Your wife would get more and more upset," Kelso continued, "more and more convinced that her dead mother was telephoning somehow. You wanted her brother's money. Did you invite him here yourself?"

The old man said nothing. His hands worked on the cane.

"Arnold Anderson came here yesterday. You got up at two this morning and rang the bell, using the hidden button in the

bathroom. By the time Arnold went downstairs, you were making tea in the kitchen. You knocked him down with your cane, and stuck a kitchen knife in his chest."

Herbert Potter's eyes narrowed. He gripped his cane with both hands.

"Then," Kelso said, "you went back into the dark kitchen and drank your tea. You knew your wife would tell us a wild story about phone calls from her dead mother, and about how she hated her brother, and we'd think she killed him. Isn't that right, Mr. Potter?"

Potter's chest heaved, as if he were taking a deep breath.

"I tricked him just now," Kelso said to Meyer. "I found the wires in the bathroom and cut them. When he went in there to make the bell ring, he heard nothing, and assumed something was wrong with the bell, or maybe the battery. He came rushing down . . ."

"Is that right, Mr. Potter?" Meyer shouted. "CAN YOU HEAR? DID YOU KILL ARNOLD?"

Herbert Potter's mouth opened and closed. It opened again, and he spoke in a hoarse raspy voice:

"You can't prove a thing. I made the bell ring, and I ain't deaf. That don't prove I murdered anybody."

"What about it, Kelso?" Meyer

asked tightly.

"I forgot," Kelso said, shrugging. "Actually, I knew Potter did it the moment I set eyes on him."

"What? *How?*"

"Look at his cane. See how that spot on the handle's worn smooth from gripping it in the same place all the time? But ever since I saw him tonight, he's been holding it just *below* that smooth part. Pry his fingers away from there, and I think you'll find Arnold Anderson's blood. That's what he used to hit him on the head."

Herbert Potter's face darkened with rage. He lifted the cane over his head, and suddenly he was no longer a frail old man. He said thickly: "Damn your hides!" And charged.

Kelso ducked. The cane swished past his left ear.

Meyer grabbed the man's arm. "You're under arrest for murder," he said.

When they were able to get the cane away from him, they found, just beneath the smooth, worn section Potter's hands had covered, a reddish-brown stain.

It was on his hands, too.

It was after five A.M. when Kelso got back to his apartment. Snow still fell, accumulating slowly. The white world seemed deathly still. His

big yellow cat met him at the door and he gave it some milk, then dragged himself to bed.

He turned out the light and climbed under the covers, tired and nervous. Violent death bothered him; he resented it. The room was cold. He was reluctant to let himself sleep; he didn't want that nightmare coming back.

Telephones in the night. Voices from the grave. He wondered if the old woman had really imagined all of it. What if she'd heard some of the ringing after her phones had been taken out but before her husband's trick with the doorbell?

His phone rang.

Kelso sat bolt upright in the darkness. A waking nightmare, he thought.

It rang again.

He got up and answered it, shivering, his pulse thundering in his ears.

"Yes?"

"George? I just called to see if you're all right."

"Oh. Susan. It's five in the morning."

"I know. I'm sorry." A pause. Then: "George?"

"What."

"I love you."

Kelso sighed. "Me, too," he said, and replaced the receiver.

Back in his bed, the nightmare faded rapidly, and he slept.

FICTION

The Price of Tomatoes

by
William Bunce

Illustration by Susan Barrasi

118

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“**H**ope springs eternal”—that’s what Edie Sangroff said to herself when, from the kitchen window of her retirement home, she watched her husband Morton once more attack the stubborn clay of the back yard garden.

Outside, in the glassy afternoon sunshine, Morton jabbed the spade viciously at the ground. Perspiration trickled over his salt-and-pepper eyebrows and down his flushed cheeks. Every time he turned a clump of earth, his spine felt like a hot wire shooting sparks through his arms and legs.

Years ago Dr. Traub had suggested gardening as a way of reducing Morton’s blood pressure. “Great recreation,” he remembered the physician saying, “and you can beat the supermarket out of a few bucks, what with the price of fresh produce nowadays.” Morton took his advice to heart. Now the good doctor was resting comfortably in the shade of a concrete archangel, while his ex-patient toiled like a Chinese coolie. Each year he drove himself to his gardening chores, but only recently had he begun to ask himself why.

He might just as well ask himself why he put his fist through two wall lockers after he captained the Crimson Cou-

gars to their loss of the state championship in ’38. Or why he left his squad behind to be one of the first infantrymen off Omaha Beach during D-Day. Morton was a sucker for competition. The plaque that rode his office desk for forty years was now over his front door. It read: When the going gets tough, the tough get going.

Of course, he had his detractors. Some even thought him a poor loser. These he dismissed as envious cretins. As evidence of his lack of sportsmanship, critics would refer to the celebrated “doubles incident,” which continued to run the rounds of senior tennis buffs. Skip Solar-ski, a retired podiatrist from Brooklyn, still took medication as a result of that little blowup. After a brief executive session, the rules committee voted to banish Morton from the sports complex pending a written apology. This, needless to say, was not forthcoming.

That left tomatoes. Every summer, Harmony Village’s weekly tabloid, the *Sunday Sentinel*, awarded a prize for the biggest tomato grown within the confines of the community. For three straight years he had carried away the trophy without much trouble. Then Archie Ledbetter moved in next door, and Morton became a has-been. Sure, his fruit continued to ripen

on schedule, large-globed and sweet as heaven; but they were nothing compared to Ledbetter's. His were the size of small cantaloupes and the color of clotted blood.

In fact, the first time Archie took Grand Prize, Morton suspected chicanery. His neighbor had erected a six-foot cedar fence to shield his plot from prying eyes and, for insurance, posted an ill-humored Doberman pinscher near the gate. From his bedroom window, however, Morton had a bird's eye view of Ledbetter's secret nook. In the interests of fair play, he was determined to observe the development of his neighbor's garden and report any irregularity to the judges.

The first surprise: Ledbetter grew nothing but tomatoes. No peppers, squash, cucumbers—just a few stringy plants he picked up on sale at the local K-Mart.

The second surprise: Morton's neighbor took little or no interest in his crops after shoving them rudely into the ground. Not once did Morton see him breaking his back weeding or squishing loathsome hornworms from the fragile transplants—just as he did night after night while the mosquitoes took their due.

After a week of such negligence, to Morton's amazement,

Ledbetter's plants simply took off. The stalks grew as thick as a man's arm, and the leaves turned as green as a spring grasshopper. At contest time Ledbetter could have randomly picked any of his tomatoes and walked away with first prize.

Morton vowed this year would be different. He was no more willing to let his rival push him out of the picture than he was willing to let the Germans push him into the sea that fateful day in 1944. It was just another kind of war; and as he leaned on the shovel, exhausted after digging only one row, Morton decided the first step in any campaign was to gather intelligence.

Accordingly, the next night he set out for Archie Ledbetter's front door with a bottle of his best blackberry wine. He leaned on the doorbell for five minutes before deciding it was out of order. Typical. The man hadn't fixed a thing since he moved in. The front gutter waved ominously in the light breeze; the plastic-potted plants dangling from the porch were shriveled skeletons; the little jockey lying on the front lawn had toppled with his lamp in a rainstorm. All of which pointed to someone who just didn't care, who thumbed his nose at his neighbors and let the world go to rack and ruin.

Morton transferred the wine bottle to his left hand and banged on the door with his fist. Somewhere in the depths of the house he heard what sounded like heavy furniture being moved about, an anthropoid grunt, and finally footsteps shuffling towards the door. Morton smoothed down the front of his sportshirt and looked as pleasant as possible. The door opened a chain's length and a watery blue eye looked him up and down.

"Hi, neighbor," said Morton in a voice so loud it even startled himself. "Just thought you'd appreciate a bottle of my blackberry wine." He thrust the bottle at the crack in the doorway. "Make it myself with a press: I have in the cellar."

The eye narrowed. "That you, Mort Sangroff?"

"The same."

"You look different in the dark—skinnier."

Morton was losing patience. After all, nobody chained their doors in Harmony Village; there hadn't been a single robbery in five years. Who was he afraid of, anyway? "Listen, do you want this or not?" Once more he held up the unlabeled bottle before the eye. This time the chain rattled a few times, and the door finally swung open.

Ledbetter was in his striped pajamas. Most of the buttons

were missing from the jacket, and his huge, hairy belly sagged obscenely over the elastic. He looked as if he hadn't shaved in several days, and he smelled like a damp horse. "How strong is that stuff?" he said, extending one of his sausage fingers:

"Strong enough," muttered Morton, putting a foot inside the doorway. "Why don't you invite me in, and we'll find out?"

The neighbor rubbed his stubbled chin for a moment. "I was going to hit the liquor store," he said. "Gin ran out yesterday, but now you saved me the trouble." He made a mock cavalier gesture with one arm. "Come into my parlor, please."

He led Morton into the kitchen, then hunted in the cupboards for some glasses. He came up with two dusty jelly jars. "It's only homemade stuff," he cracked. "No need to get fancy."

Morton dispensed the wine, making sure that Ledbetter got twice as much. "I had a couple before I got here," he explained.

Ledbetter shrugged. "All the same to me, buddy-boy." Just as he put the glass to his lips, he hesitated. "Say, you wouldn't poison me, would you?"

"Why would I do that?"

The gurgling laugh started at the bottom of Ledbetter's

belly and slowly rose to the top until his whole flabby body rippled with mirth. Finally he trained his gaze on Morton, deadly serious. "'Cause I beat you out of that Grand Prize year after year." Another wave of laughter. "I don't care about the tomatoes. That pukey look you get when they hand me that award is reward enough."

Overcoming his urge to throttle the beast right then and there, Morton forced a smile. "So don't drink if you think I'd poison you."

For a minute there was silence between them. Ledbetter's lips twisted into an ugly leer, and he drained off the glass in one gulp. "Not bad," he said, using the back of his hand to erase the stain of the wine. "Let's belly up and have another go." He slammed the jar down on the table for seconds.

They drank into the night. When the first bottle ran out, Morton scurried back for another, then another, until he made back to the house. All he knew was that Ledbetter's kitchen kept shifting and distorting until he felt as if he were inside an abstract picture.

The conversation returned to tomatoes. "I've got to admit I can't grow them as good as you, Ledbetter. Nobody's seen specimens like yours—around here, anyway."

As far gone as he was, Ledbetter's radar picked up the insinuation at once. He pounded a hammy fist on the table. "Well, I grow 'em back of the house. I don't care what anybody thinks." He leaned forward secretively. "I bet you'd like to know how I do it, buddy-boy?"

Morton stifled his curiosity for the moment. "Everybody has their own recipe. Mrs. Gebhardt buries tea leaves, Gabe Hoffsteder spreads chicken manure. . . ."

"Boneheads," announced Ledbetter. He gripped Morton's arm, and his fingers reached all the way around the biceps. "If I show you how it's done, you promise to keep it to yourself?"

This was exactly what Morton had wanted. It was simply a matter of letting the liquor do its work. He would have enjoyed his victory more, though, if strange things weren't happening inside his stomach. "I promise," he said solemnly.

Ledbetter disappeared for a minute and returned with a New York newspaper. He threw it down in front of Morton. "What do you see on the front page?"

He really tried to focus, but it was difficult for Morton. All he could make out was a fuzzy young blonde. "It's a girl," he said.

"What does the caption read?"

The words stumbled off Morton's tongue: "PROSTITUTE FOUND SLASHED." He looked at Ledbetter blankly. "So what does that have to do with tomatoes?"

His neighbor looked at him slyly and emptied the dregs of the bottle into his jelly jar. "Just this: After I got out the navy, I worked my way around South America as a straw boss, building bridges, roads, and such. I was working in a little town in Peru called Ayaquipo—just a bunch of shacks on the side of a dead volcano. Anyway, I get in tight with the old priest. He tells me his people are the descendants of the ancient Incas, that they still honor the old gods. At the beginning of every growing season they sacrifice a young woman in supplication to these spirits; and in return, they nourish and protect the crops. At first I think the old man is just talking through his hat, but then he takes me along as a witness. The whole village trails up the side of this volcano with the girl and the priest in the lead. She kneels at a certain point and. . . ." Ledbetter sliced his hand across his throat. "Best corn I ever tasted."

When Morton shoved his chair back from the table, it made an unnerving screech against the linoleum. For a moment he had no idea what Ledbetter was driving at. Then it dawned on

him. "You're saying— Let me get this straight. You're saying you kidnapped this girl from New York and cut her throat in your back garden?" The whole idea seemed like a joke, but his neighbor wasn't smiling.

"Kidnap?" he roared. "Those hookers swarm over the city like maggots in a garbage can. I just give one a few bucks temporarily and put her out of her misery."

"There's a big difference between Acapulco—or whatever you call it—and New Jersey," countered Morton.

Ledbetter seemed to enjoy his guest's discomfiture. "I'll tell you what the old man told me: The gods are always around us, like the sun and the wind. All you have to do is give 'em what they want."

"I don't believe a word of it."

"Fine." Ledbetter lurched to his feet. "Follow me."

The humid night air pressed around Morton like damp cotton as he followed in the tracks of his partner. A dark figure slid towards them. "Lie down, Satan," Ledbetter ordered, and the figure retreated into the shadows. He flung open the gate to the tomato garden, then pulled Morton into the jungle of vines.

"Go ahead," he said. "Reach down and grab a handful of dirt."

Morton did as he was told. It

felt sticky. He lifted it to his nose. He remembered the smell from the slaughterhouse on Omaha.

Back in the kitchen, both men collapsed into their chairs. Morton happened to glance at the hand that had held the soil. It was still a dark crimson. All at once his stomach began to heave. Although the sink was only a few feet away, he made it just in time. As spasms of nausea jolted through his body, he could hear the raucous laughter behind him. "If you want anything bad enough," Ledbetter thundered, "you gotta pay the price!"

After that night, Morton began doing something he had not done since his army days, before Edie was there to smooth out the kinks in his life. He began to drink heavily. Only in the blurred world of intoxication could he forget Ledbetter's challenge. At bottom, Morton was a sensitive man; and unable to cope with a perverse alliance of spirit and flesh, he felt robbed of his one last chance for recognition.

Like others who feel set upon by the world, he struck out at those closest to him. In the weeks that followed, Morton managed to alienate most of his friends. He quarreled over the smallest matters and frequently resorted to physical

threats when his drunken pronouncements were not immediately accepted.

His wife was alarmed one night to find him attacking his glass trophy case with a hammer. "What are you doing?" she screamed. When Morton wheeled to face her, she thought she was looking at a stranger. His clothes and demeanor reminded Edie of the derelicts in the city who wiped your windshield for a quarter. He still had the hammer above his head when he approached her, and for the first time in her life she was terrified of her husband.

Suddenly he relaxed. Like a puppet whose strings are cut, he went limp, and the hammer slipped to the carpet. "Sorry," he mumbled. "This tomato thing is getting to me. I can't bear to think of that fat slob Ledbetter rubbing my face in the dirt again."

Edie wrapped her arms around her husband. "It's not important, dear." She looked down at the splinters of glass that lay before the trophy case. "Now let's clean up this mess before somebody gets cut."

"Let me show you something first." His voice was flat, toneless; but his eyes had the restless glitter of a man who hadn't slept in days. "Out in the garden. There's something you have to see."

"Of course, dear." Happy to see the revival of his old interests, Edie took his hand, and they walked out into the moonlight. "You know," she began as they strolled along the path, "years ago we used to take walks together like this all the time. When did we ever stop?"

But Morton didn't answer. Instead, he pointed to a spot close to the biggest tomato plant. "Down there," he said. "Look real close and you can see it." Obediently, Edie kneeled and put her head close to the ground. She never saw the flash of the paring knife as it came across her throat, nor did she hear the howl of Satan, barely ten yards away, as he turned in his sleep.

All afternoon Archie Ledbetter lay in his rusting lawn chair watching the show. He went through two bags of Fritos chuckling at the boneheads gathering around the patrol cars in front of the Sangroff rancher.

A red pickup with MILLER'S GARDENING SUPPLIES stenciled on the front door pulled up across the street, and a boy carrying a gallon jug ran over to Ledbetter's front yard. Archie gave him a brief wave of rec-

ognition. Jimmy put the jug on the grass next to the recliner and pulled on his baseball cap.

"Who'd expect something like this — in Harmony Village?" he said, nodding toward the police cars.

"People are people," growled Ledbetter. He twisted off the cap to the jug and took a deep sniff. Satisfied with its contents, he placed it back on the grass.

"Where did you come up with the idea of rabbit blood, anyway?"

Ledbetter winked. "Little trick I picked up in Peru. Feeds the plants and keeps the critters away."

The boy's gaze returned to the crowd, now beginning to disperse for dinner. "Still beats me how a guy with everything he could want would up and kill a sweet old lady like Mrs. Sangroff."

Archie Ledbetter was already trundling towards his front door with the jug cradled in his arms. "I'll tell you one thing buddy-boy didn't have," he said, jerking a fat thumb over his shoulder. "He didn't have no sense of humor, that's for sure."

MYSTERY CLASSIC

Stella Crozier

by Booth
Tarkington

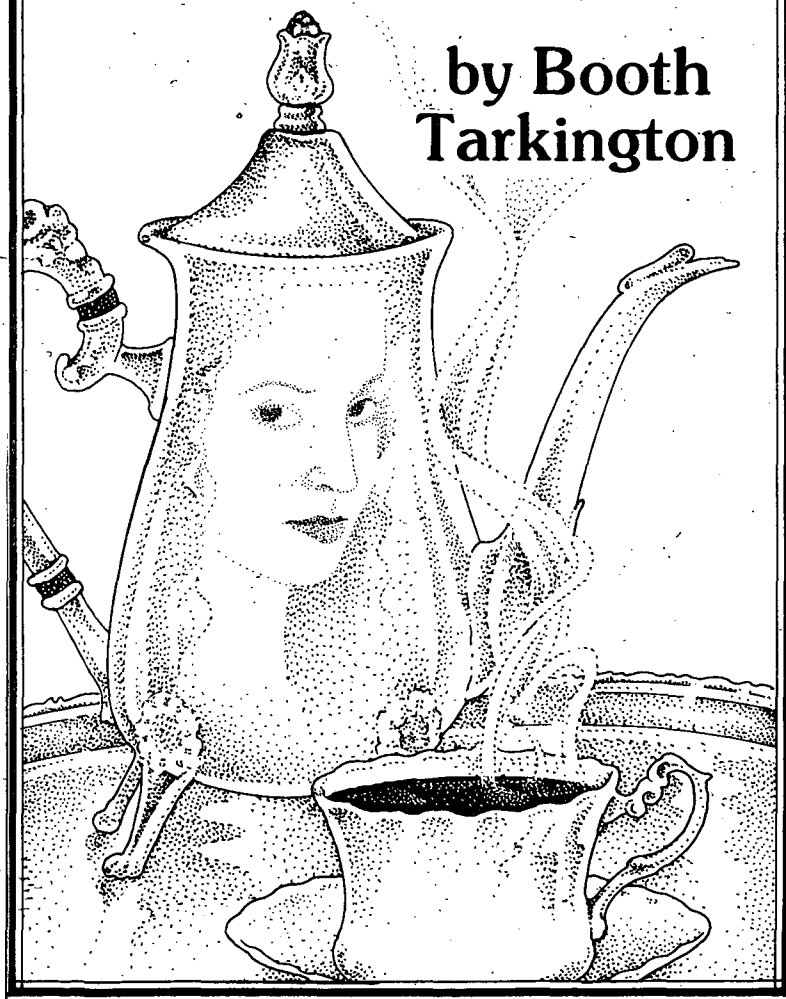


Illustration by Glenn Wolff

126

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Any middle-aged native of our overgrowing and smoky city can tell you the fairy story of George Crozier's fortune. Of course, in one sense it wouldn't be thought a fairy story, because it is true. What made it seem magical to us was that a fortune of such size could be acquired by one of ourselves.

We were used to reading of people in New York who were worth as much as George Crozier; but to have for a fellow townsman so overwhelming a millionaire—a man we every day saw familiarly upon our own streets—seemed incredible enough to be a little necromantic. Fairies or Fates appeared to have singled this one of us out, set him apart and gilded him with a glorious light; even Crozier's old cronies and neighbors couldn't help showing greater deference to him than they did to their more ordinarily successful friends; and as for the manner of the general townsmen with him, it was as close to an awed reverence as the self-respect of a free citizenry permits.

This magical gilding of Crozier emitted illuminations that glowed upon all his possessions; but the things most personal to him were those most magnetically aureate. His house, emanating gold dust in the afternoon sunshine, hushed the voices of people driving by, but long held their passing faces toward it. His car at the curbstone before the Crozier Building brought pedestrians to stop and gaze, though never to stand quite close to it. In the eyes of bank clerks who saw Crozier's hat upon a desk while he talked with the president, that hat was a thing vivid with significance; and among the commonalty even his Negro servants held a curious prestige because of their daily access to his person.

Most personal of all to him, and most warmly gilded by the illumination, was, of course, his only child, his daughter, Stella; for Crozier was a widower before the gilding began. Stella grew up with the growing illumination, and by the time she was of marriageable age, she was the very center of it, as glowing as Crozier himself. Not only her young contemporaries were conscious of Stella's glow; her elders proved as eager. When she went to a reception or tea where older women were, they hurried to gather about her, chattering, seeming to be made merry in that gold light she shed; and the first to reach her, when she came in, was usually a bishop's wife.

For Stella was a philanthropist, though she didn't look like one. She was a small girl, with curled fair hair, a small white face, and one of those small mouths that seem to have lately eaten too much

candy and to suspect everyone of intending to offer it more. This pampered and disapproving look of hers wasn't temporary; it was her characteristic expression; so no one could believe that great riches made Stella Crozier bloomingly happy. She appeared to have no outright joys whatever, though she undoubtedly took a pale and withholding kind of pleasure in the jewels she bought, and she usually wore such massive and important ones that she could have looked in place only at a coronation. Yet even her great emeralds were tainted with discontent for her; she bargained sharply with her jewellers and always in the end was sure that they had overcharged her.

It was so with her philanthropies; she bargained about them, too, and was seldom satisfied that someone wasn't cheating her. In her benevolence she followed an unyielding principle—so she called it—and never gave anything without qualification and restriction. If the Mercy Hospital Board would raise thirty thousand dollars for the new ward, Stella would give fifteen thousand; but the fund must be called the Crozier Foundation, and the patients admitted should be strictly limited to sufferers from spinal disorders.

Moreover, Stella always had a cause or two of her own for which she was, in turn, soliciting money. Something would strike her imagination and she'd organize a fund for it and make us all feel that our public duty required us to subscribe to it. At the time she gave the fifteen thousand dollars to the Mercy Hospital she was interested in a ten-year-old girl with a pretty voice. Stella liked to hear the child sing and said that such a voice ought to be cultivated; so she went about with a subscription list, which she had headed with a promise of several hundred dollars in case the rest should be subscribed and thus collected the five thousand she thought necessary. The members of the Mercy Hospital Board all had to put their names down for Stella's Musical Education Fund before she subscribed to the new ward. She spent a large part of her time raising money for her causes; she hadn't much else to do, and no doubt she did a great deal of good.

But the truth is, she was what we called "close." She herself could easily have given the money she raised; and, as we say, she'd never have known the difference. When she was twenty her father had made a trust fund for her that gave her independent means greater than those of any other person in the city—except Crozier himself, of course—and even though she bought for herself every-

thing that she could possibly imagine she wanted, she didn't spend a fifth of her income. This closeness of hers was a curious thing, though thoughtful old citizens sometimes accounted for it by the fact that her mother worried a great deal about Crozier's putting all his eggs in one basket, as he did when he acquired the basis of his later great fortune. That was the year Stella was born, and they said Mrs. Crozier died as much of worry over money as she did of Stella.

One peculiar symptom of Stella's closeness was talked about more critically than the others were. That is to say, it was talked about among the families intimate with the Croziers—for of course it is by our nearest friends that we are most talked about—and this was her treatment of her cousin, Lucy Pauls.

Lucy was the same age that Stella was, and smallish like Stella, but much prettier. Of course, Lucy's being the prettier wasn't noticed usually; and probably Stella herself never knew it, for she had Lucy with her a great deal of the time, not exactly as a companion but as a background assistant; Lucy was naturally quiet and seemed to make no effort to appear more than a kind of congenial attendant in waiting on her cousin. She was a cousin on Stella's mother's side, not really related to Crozier; and that was probably why he hadn't made any stable provision for her as he had for all his own relatives.

But we who knew the Croziers well often asked one another the question: Why didn't Stella herself make some such provision for her cousin? Lucy was an orphan; her father hadn't left her anything at all; and at twenty-five she found herself overlooked by the boys she'd grown up with. They were busy marrying other girls or laying siege to Stella; and for all the attention any of them paid to Lucy, she might as well have been furniture. Young men are likely to look upon background features as neuter, and being pretty and intelligent didn't help Lucy to appear anything but neuter as long as she was background. It seemed in a fair way to become a permanent position for her; but the trouble was that it didn't carry a salary with it. True, it sometimes brought her a dress or wrap that Stella had worn and Lucy could make over for herself; and Stella took her once or twice to New York or Hot Springs for a fortnight, and at Christmas gave her a string of crystal beads, or a small amethyst pin, or a prettily bound book, perhaps; but for the actual means to pay the weekly bills in the boarding house where she lived, Lucy had to turn elsewhere.

She had a fairly easy small position as a sort of librarian for the Chamber of Commerce, and it gave her time to study stenography and wait on Stella. Also, her stenography helped her to look after Stella's correspondence, which was large and called for the service of a professional secretary; but Stella wouldn't have one, because, she said, she didn't want to be burdened with a secretary. It was Mary Buell who explained what Stella really meant by this. Mary Buell lived next door to the great lawn-girt villa Crozier had built on the site of the old quiet house he had formerly lived in. Mary was thirty-four and charming; she hadn't married, and I have heard her called "a complete gossip," the word "complete" implying that she had no other occupation. Of course, her own definition of herself was different. She said she resembled that pleasant French Academician who at seventy regarded his curiosity about other people as a proper justification for still going on living. "Like him, I'm really an interpreter," Mary explained. "Life needs a few of us to look on and reveal our neighbors to one another."

"What Stella Crozier means by the burden of having a secretary," Mary said to me one day—I am her cousin and often go to her for interpretations—"What Stella really means is that she doesn't see the use of burdening herself with paying a secretary when she can just as well get Lucy to do the work for nothing. Wouldn't you think she'd do something substantial for that girl? Wouldn't you think that if she couldn't be generous enough to set aside a thousandth part of her property to give Lucy a little independence, she'd at least pay her a salary for the work she gets out of her? Not Stella Crozier! Here's a burlesque situation for you: Lucy gives Stella hundreds of times more than what Stella gives Lucy, and it is Stella who is dependent on Lucy—she has Lucy do a great deal more for her than anyone suspects—and yet people generally believe that Stella does all the giving and that Lucy's a poor dependent on Stella's benevolence. This world is the most absurd place!"

"What is it that Stella has Lucy do that the rest of us don't suspect? You don't mean—well, underhanded, do you, Mary?"

She looked doubtful.

"Not exactly—not in a feminine sense, at least. You might call it sly—no, secret. Secret from men, at least."

"But what is it?"

My cousin laughed wisely. "To understand that you'd have to understand Stella better than you do; you probably wouldn't believe me if I'd tell you."

"You might try. What is it I don't understand about Stella? I know she's close, of course—"

Mary Buell interrupted me; she uttered a little cry of triumph. "Ah! But you don't understand why she's close!"

"I suppose she was born so."

"That explains only that she's always been what she is now," Mary returned. "What you can't understand is that Stella Crozier has never in her life had to do anything she didn't want to, and that's one reason she's nothing in the world but a sample bit of human female nature in the raw. You can't understand it because you couldn't understand what such a bit of nature is. Only another female—and a very intelligent one—could understand the full meaning of that."

"All right," I said. "What is the unsuspected thing that Stella makes Lucy Pauls do?"

Mary looked at me whimsically; she evidently deliberated within her; then she became serious. "I wonder if a man could possibly see it," she said musingly. "If the thing were under your very eyes and you were looking straight at it, I wonder if you could see it."

"Give me a chance to look at it and I'll tell you whether or not I see it, Mary," I answered.

"I?" she said. "I have nothing to do with it. It's Stella and Lucy. As a matter of fact, they'll put it under your eyes this very evening. You're going there to dinner, aren't you?"

"Yes. Aren't you?"

"Of course," Mary said thoughtfully, then looked at me in a skeptical, sharp way she had. "Have you ever taken the pains to read a dinner properly?"

"Read?" I inquired. "My impression is that dinners are usually—"

"Usually eaten?" she interrupted, with satire. "Cookery interests you to that extent? You go out to dinner for the purpose of taking nourishment simultaneously with other people, do you? Seems rather a trivial sort of imbecility to me. And as for making and listening to verbal noises as part of your duty during the process, you don't find babble very stimulating, do you? Some people say they go to dinners because it's a way of developing good talk, but for that I found long ago I'd do a great deal better at a lecture. At twenty I thought they were a penalty for living as a social person; but at twenty-eight I discovered they were meant to be read, and after that discovery they became my favorite revel. I recommend the habit to you; it's as good as a play. In fact, that's what it actually is, often enough."

"But about the secret things you say Stella makes Lucy Pauls do for her—"

"Those secret things will be under your very eyes tonight, I told you," Mary interrupted. "If you have any talent at all as a dinner reader, you couldn't have a fairer opportunity to show it than this evening will offer you, and you'll discover for yourself what it is that Lucy does; you can bring me home afterward and I'll tell you whether you're right or not. The main thing for you to remember is that it's all very simple and in words of one syllable."

"You mean that Stella—" I began; but she cut me off.

"I mean you must do your own reading. If you read what I read, then it will be all right for us to talk about it; but if I should merely tell you what I read I'd be no better than the ordinary gossip literal-minded people sometimes say I am."

She frowned virtuously as she spoke, and although I urged her a little she remained firmly noncommittal. I had to find out what I could for myself at the Croziers' dinner. Mary had challenged me, so to say, and besides, I was sharply curious—a state of mind for which no one need apologize since Mary's discovery that curiosity as a justification for living has the sanction of that fine authority, the French Academy.

The dinner table was a roseate oval plateau within the setting of the long and lofty ivory-colored Crozier dining room, where laughed down upon us the Boucher panels Crozier's architect had made him buy. It was one of those rooms that are decorative to the most commonplace occupants, for even these become glamored by the noble background into the semblance of portraits finer than the sitters. The Crozier dining room, moreover, was peculiarly becoming to the pale but able-bodied Crozier himself—a personage not lacking in grizzled grandee distinction anywhere, and at the head of his own table as imposing as he was untalkative. For that matter, any table at which he sat would have seemed his own and his seat the head of it, though he said nothing, or, indeed, partly because he said nothing. He had that talent for saying nothing which sometimes makes impressive men prodigious.

At his right sat the ostensible reason for the repast, Mrs. Strumer Greene, comely, blonde, statuesque in figure though not in manner, no resident of our city, but an old friend of Crozier's. Her husband had been his associate in commercial enterprises upon the sea-board; she had inherited an interest in these and twice before had

traveled this far to confer with Crozier upon the business. Evidently, this time he had felt that she was recovered enough from her bereavement to be offered a dinner; and in plain truth she appeared more than convalescent.

At times she chattered gaily to her host, at other times was humorously confidential and whispered to him; she touched his arm affectionately and even patted his hand. I thought she affected playfully to coquet with him in so far as it is possible for anybody to pretend to coquet with a familiar old friend; and this comedy seemed to be her effort to do her share, as principal guest, in enlivening the table. Crozier in the same spirit appeared to look upon her kittenishness benignly; but it was plain that I should find no clue to Mary Buell's meaning here. If I was to read this dinner I must look elsewhere.

Naturally, the elsewhere to look was in the first place at Stella, and in the second, at Lucy. Stella sat languid behind a collection of her most staggering jewels at the other end of the table—it was impossible not to look at them before you looked at her. She seemed more than usually a little thing, unimportant herself, like the unnoted staff of a spectacular banner; the gems were fastened to her, it is true, but their bedazzlings appeared to be their own and disconnected from her. Moreover, the young man who sat beside her apparently shared this disconnection, although he, too, was supposedly hers, being in fact, her betrothed.

This was young Garvey of the Garvey Refrigerator dynasty, a business mildly prosperous under his grandfather and affluent now, so that young Garvey appeared to be the nearest thing to an appropriate alliance for the Crozier heiress that our community afforded. He had been the great desirable for every girl's mother in the town, though, of course, none of them continued any hope after he began to look toward Stella Crozier. He was any mother's beau ideal for a daughter's husband, this well-favored young man whose judgment and energy were already known to be respected by his father and uncles. Nothing praiseworthy appeared to lack in him; he was both a devoted figure in the life of his church and a manly one upon the polo field.

Stella had taken him rather in the manner of taking the best thing in sight as naturally one of her possessions, but tonight he appeared to be more an adjunct of Mary Buell's, for he talked continually with Mary and not at all with Stella. I concluded, however, that this might be partly because engaged persons often

say little to each other when on display and partly because Stella had little to say to him. She was almost as silent as her father; but where his benignity encouraged Mrs. Greene's gaieties, Stella's languid distrustfulness of expression, habitual with her and not relaxed in favor of the genial occasion, encouraged nothing.

My reading made no progress with her, though I caught a glimpse of what seemed a kind of peevish urgency in her glances at Lucy, who was unaware, I thought, both of the glances and the urgency in them. Lucy appeared to be too busy, indeed, with the gentleman upon her left to have time for anything else. She sat directly across the table from me, and I was glad she did; for this was one of those surprising evenings that sometimes befall a pretty woman, apparently by chance, making her beautiful. There was a warmth upon Lucy Pauls that came near radiance, and whatever she had done to the pinkish brocaded gown she wore—without doubt a discarded one of Stella's—she had made it a rosy charm upon her. No one could have taken her for a poor relation or a background cousin; she was all alight and the air seemed bright about her.

The favored gentleman next her, naturally beaming in the rays she shed upon him, was Atwill Daily. I knew him pretty well and marveled that Lucy found him inspiring; he seemed to me a good enough old soul, as we say, but certainly no spark of white fire. He worked faithfully, took care of his mother and sister, with whom he lived, did welfare work two evenings every week, read musical reviews, never missed a concert, was amiable, hopeful, mildly handsome in a prematurely baldish way, and talked copiously about whatever had no importance.

Since with all his fluency he never said anything not already frequently said and Lucy was notoriously intelligent, I felt an increasing astonishment at her ardent attention to his discourse and at the elation she visibly derived from it. In the general fanfare their actual words were obscure to my ears, but no one could question that here was a couple for whom the occasion made a happy and congenial opportunity. Such was my conclusion—a tame one for a neophyte reader of dinners, and no clue to the secret doings of Lucy Pauls under the compulsion of her cousin. Certainly Stella was not making Lucy enjoy talking to Atwill Daily.

Mary had said the secret would be placed before my very eyes and had intimated that I must look, not for subtle undercurrents, but for something obvious and simple. What I saw, however, proved altogether too simple, being nothing at all. Nobody did anything

significant; nothing happened. Of course, what I watched for most alertly was anything that Lucy might do upon a hint from Stella; but during the whole evening Lucy did only two things that any suggestion of Stella's might be thought to account for, and both of these things were so casual that it would have been absurd to see anything sly or hidden behind them.

The first happened when coffee was brought to the table. Crozier always had a separate service for himself—he relished an infamous kind of thick Turkish coffee, a strangling brown mush that nobody else could endure. It was made at the table for him, usually by Stella, in the silver machine that was placed before her tonight; but the guest of special honor intervened. “Do let me make it,” Mrs. Strumer Greene begged. “I understand Turkish coffee and I’d dearly love to show your father my own pet little way of brewing it.” The instrument was sent to her and she had the attention of the table while she brightly operated. No timidity bothered her as she thus became the center of the stage; on the contrary, the center seemed to her taste, for she bloomed at once into the playful ingénue, and her demonstrations were those of the cosy housewife at work for the master. “You do it thus and so, you see,” she said in this honeyed manner. “And now you take off the top of the silver furnace, you see, and shovel in all the coal—like this.” So she humorously dramatized the powdered coffee and the compartment it was to occupy. “Then you pour in the water that’s to keep the coal from catching fire, you see—and then you stir it and stir it with the beautiful silver coal shovel, you see—like this—and after that you close the furnace again. Then you listen and listen till you hear, oh, the loveliest bubbling sounds inside! And when you do, then you can give the sultan his coffee. No!” She made chas-tising gestures with a spoon, beating Crozier’s sleeve with it—he had extended his hand toward the cup in waiting. “No! Be patient. The lovely bubbling sound hasn’t come yet. Listen! Ah—now it has!”

She filled the cup; gave it to Crozier; he drank; and his daughter, after observing his face, said quietly, “Never mind, Papa.” She nodded to Lucy. “Lucy, perhaps you’d better—”

Lucy sat near Crozier’s end of the table and next but one to Mrs. Greene. Atwill Daily was the intervening guest, and, following the direction of a slight gesture from Stella, passed the coffee machine on its tray to his right-hand neighbor. “Just a minute, Cousin George,” Lucy said quietly.

Mrs. Greene protested merrily, beating Crozier again with the spoon. "What! Make a face over the first perfect Turkish coffee he ever tasted? An Arab sheik taught me how to make it, in the Souks at Tunis. Don't dare tell me it isn't delicious! I'll show you!" And to prove her point the merry widow seized upon the cup she had prepared for Crozier and too quickly drank from it.

Too quickly, because the Souks at Tunis furnish no experience of the rancid mystery that Crozier preferred as coffee. Mrs. Greene's face at once showed a terrible perplexity. A problem engrossed her, and for a moment it was evident that she could not decide which of two courses, both heroic, to follow. She chose the one internally disastrous, swallowed what she had so lightly invited within the portal of her lips, and then, being a brave woman, commanded those well-penciled lips to the semblance of a smile.

"There!" she said; but the word was something gasplike.

"Get her to drink some water," Lucy said in an undertone to Daily, who obeyed as far as he was able; but Mrs. Greene, with a little pettishness, pushed away the crystal goblet he offered her.

"Please, Mr. Daily!" she said. "I'm quite able to lift my own glass if I need it, thank you!" Then she recovered herself enough to beat Crozier again with the spoon. "How dare you laugh at me?"

That seemed to me a mistaken interpretation of Crozier's expression; he was waiting for his coffee in some impatience. "Well, Lucy," he said, "if you don't mind—"

"It's ready," she returned, filling a fresh cup, which Daily passed to him; and she added, "I think the lovely bubbling was all right this time."

A breath of laughter irresistibly forced itself into her voice as she spoke, and she had evidently intended an undertone in the ear of Atwill Daily, for she showed distress when a surreptitious giggle went about the table. "Oh, dear!" she said. "I didn't know everybody was listening. Mrs. Greene, I certainly didn't mean you to hear me. You must forgive me."

"Not at all." The maturer lady nodded graciously, and though her cheeks showed a suffusion of color, it may have been due more to what she had swallowed than to Lucy's too impulsive mockery: "Not at all. I'm still convinced that my own little silvery bubbling was the loveliest; but I suppose I'll have to learn how to produce yours if I'm ever to be allowed to use this particular machine again." She turned to Crozier, chiding him amiably: "Treachorous person!"

He laughed, benign again; for he had his coffee. It pleased him, and ceased to be interesting to his guests, who were already prattling in couples. I tried to catch Mary Buell's eyes; but couldn't, as she was on my side of the table and talking with young Garvey. What I meant my own eye to ask hers, severely, was the question: "Is this one of the secret things Stella has Lucy do for her? Making Crozier's coffee?" Naturally, Lucy knew how, since she was so much in attendance on her cousin as to be almost part of the household; and the reason Stella asked her to make it tonight was obvious; to avoid the little bother of having the machine brought back to the other end of the table. What could anyone read in so shapeless a triviality? I began to be annoyed with Mary Buell and her mysteries.

The other thing that Lucy did because Stella asked her came later in the evening. We had been forming haphazard groups in the drawing room, that vastness of rose brocade and dark marble; Stella went to the piano and strummed, talking meanwhile with Atwill Daily, to whom she offered the other half of the piano bench on which she sat. Her strumming evidently reminded our host of his chief guest's accomplishment; for he brought her to the piano and waved Stella and Daily away.

"Mrs. Strumer Greene has most kindly consented to sing for us," he said, and we were at once hushed in deference. Mrs. Greene was known to possess a voice; in fact, we had been told that she would have sought an operatic career except for her late husband's persistent opposition. How successful her search might have been I did not find myself competent to say; but I have heard opera singers whose singing gave me less pleasure than Mrs. Greene's.

She settled herself upon the piano bench, making an impressive figure there; for if she appeared a little opulent of contour, she had also the authority of what is massive. She performed a double feat, playing elaborate accompaniments excellently; and the company was brought to a state of almost genuine enthusiasm, in spite of the fact that her selections were somewhat above our heads. What she gave us was from the new school in music, her composers all being the most puzzling moderns, so that I am afraid we guessed badly at the meanings and found much of the sound mere commotion. On the other hand, we could not doubt that the singer herself knew distinctly what it was all about.

Her voice was large, sure, elastic, and, at some of the crises, even exhilarating. Thus, although most of us were in doubt about when

she had finished one or two of the songs, and so misplaced some flutterings of applause—and although we found ourselves disturbed, too, for something creditable to say when she more definitely concluded—nevertheless, all in all, Mrs. Greene's entertainment had the quality and achieved the success proper to a guest of honor's display of talent in Crozier's architect's great drawing room. Mary Buell helped matters along, of course; she sat forward, glowing, made the necessary exclamation or audible breathings of wonder, and could be trusted to inquire, "What was that last marvelous thing?"

Mrs. Greene took her honors without either modesty or vain-glory; she was pleased, flushed, bright eyed, a little triumphant, but showed no peacockery. "I'm delighted, of course, if your friends liked it, George," she said to Crozier when he came to thank her as she rose from the bench. Then she turned aside with him, her hand upon his arm.

Stella had moved to a corner of the room with Atwill Daily. Now she called to her cousin. "Lucy, sing something."

Lucy looked startled. "Good gracious! The only song I ever sing is a joke, and you know it well enough, Stella."

"I don't care. Sing it."

"But surely not just after—"

"Yes," Stella insisted. "Don't be so stubborn."

Mrs. Greene glanced amusedly over her shoulder to add a gracious entreaty. "Won't you sing, Miss Pauls? I didn't know that you—"

"I don't," Lucy said, blushing. "The only song I know is an old sentimental absurdity." Her voice broke in a choke of lamenting laughter. "It's 'In the Gloaming.'"

"Don't talk so much about it," Stella called. "Sit down and sing it."

Lucy still protested: "What a horrible idea, Stella! Do you want to make me ridiculous? Do you think Mrs. Greene could bear to hear it? Probably she was fond of 'In the Gloaming' when she was a little girl and it was new enough for her nurse to sing it to her, but since then—"

Mrs. Greene interrupted, laughing good-naturedly: "I'm afraid it wasn't quite new when I was a little girl; but I'm still capable of bearing it—I should say enjoying it even, if you'll sing it, Miss Pauls."

"Lucy!" Stella called sharply. "Quit making all that fuss and do as we say."

"Won't you?" Crozier said. "I still like it, Lucy."

With a gesture, Lucy disclaimed responsibility for the consequences, went to the piano, and obediently began to sing. She had a warm little quaint voice with a frequent plaintive quavering in it like the quavering in the voice of a nine-year-old child who sings on exhibition at a family reunion; and the stringy accompaniment she played—three or four makeshift chords for which her fingers always groped—was as piteous. After the sophisticated offerings of Mrs. Strumer Greene and the swinging easy power of Mrs. Greene's voice, poor Lucy's "In the Gloaming" was like something ignoble. What made it worse, Lucy herself seemed to suffer an accompanying discredit; she should not have consented to sing even under protest, for the protest did not save her from a personal diminution.

All that evening, until she sang, she had appeared charming; but an exhibition so naïve as this made her appear too naïve indeed. And when, having begun, she seemed unable to stop, and went on to a second stanza, we were troubled by our polite facial expressions; to keep them plausible we could only cease to look at her. For my part, the sympathetic shame human beings feel under such circumstances made me unable to look directly at any of my fellow listeners; but the sidelong vision we get with even an averted eye gave me an impression of their attitudes. In this manner I was aware that Stella was still peevish but less languid beside Atwill Daily; that Atwill, being musical—though inarticulately—was distressed; that Crozier had stretched himself in a chair and dreamily regarded the ceiling; that Mrs. Greene, seated close to him, struggled with a severely threatening mirth; and that Mary Buell was excited.

Mary's excitement was the plainest of all to me, and yet the most obscure. "Dramatizing cobwebs!" I thought, angry with her and guessing—accurately—that she would later say to me, "What! You didn't even understand why Stella made her sing?"

Poor Lucy! "In the Gloaming" broke up the evening early. As she finished we produced a semblance of applausive murmuring—though not all of us were that game. Atwill Daily did nothing but stare incredulously at this disgraced dinner partner of his with whom he had lately been so congenial at the table, and almost immediately there was a general rising for departure. Lucy understood too well what had given us one of those impulses that disperse companies of people to their homes, and she assured us she would not

sing again; but though we feebly laughed with her, she knew that her apologetic humor at her own expense did not redeem her.

"I'd like to tell you what I think of your idea of dinner reading," I said to Mary Buell when we were outside. "I won't, though, because I always make it a point to be careful of your feelings."

In the moonlight she turned her head and stared at me. "Good heavens! You don't mean to tell me you didn't see it!"

"I saw whatever was to be seen. I don't see things with my imagination, you know, Mary."

"No. You don't even realize that's the only way anybody ever sees anything," she said scornfully. "Do you mean to tell me you don't even know why Lucy sang?"

"Certainly I do. I suppose she sang because Crozier asked her to."

"Because he did?" Mary cried.

"Yes. She didn't do it until he asked her. She was still refusing Stella until Crozier spoke, too."

"You goose! Stella got her to do it, just as she got her to make that coffee."

"Suppose she did. There wasn't any surreptitious, secret, sly,—"

"Oh, you poor lamb!" Mary interrupted, loftily despairing of me. We had reached her door and said nothing further till we were in the library, where she went to the grate and poked a dead fire as she spoke. "I couldn't have believed it! That even a man could go through so exciting an evening and never see—"

"Exciting?" I laughed.

"You saw a struggle between two women for a man. You saw another struggle between three women over another man. That's part of what you saw—and you saw nothing!"

Mary's brightened eyes were wide; her voice was vehement and her color high; and then, as I sat down and again laughed at her, she became furious with me. "Imbecile male gigglings!" she cried. "That's all you know how to do when you've been looking on at the crises of five lives!"

"Five? Is that all?"

"Six lives," she said. "I forgot one. You saw the crises of six lives, not five."

"Couldn't you make it seven, Mary?"

"Stop laughing!" she commanded. "You don't realize what a lack it exposes. It isn't becoming."

I tried to obey. "Give me a chance. I've just been to an altogether common-place dinner where nothing happened—unless you call

poor Lucy's mistaken vocalizings something—and you tell me that I was a witness of convulsions in the lives of six people and that I saw two sets of women's struggles—”

“You did,” Mary said. “I gave you the key to all of it this afternoon, when I told you to read in words of one syllable and that Stella Crozier was just raw human female nature.”

“Indeed?” I said. “Was that why she asked Lucy to make Crozier's coffee?”

Mary dropped the poker noisily into an iron rack and swung round upon me. “I can't stand it,” she said. “I'm going to make you see the whole thing.” She sat down, facing me. “Look here! When you met Mrs. Strumer Greene before we went into dinner, what did you think of her?”

“I thought she was a handsome, worldly person of fashion—what the eighteenth century called ‘a fine woman.’ ”

“At the beginning of the evening you thought her a proper person to be the second Mrs. Crozier, for instance.”

“Why not?” I said. “In case Crozier felt that way.”

“Exactly. What's your idea of Mrs. Strumer Greene now, when the evening is over?”

“Now? Well, I have rather a different impression of her. I have an idea that at times she might be—well, almost silly.”

“So! What did you think about Lucy Pauls when she was having such a good time with Atwill Daily at the table?”

“I thought she was a Lucy I'd never seen before—a radiant stranger among us.”

“Exactly! And what do you think of Lucy now?”

“Poor girl!” I said. “She ought never to have done it. Those things are fatal; I'm afraid I'll never be able to look at her again without thinking of the exhibition she made of herself at the piano.”

“Then the result of the evening,” Mary said sharply, “is that two women are discredited with you?”

“In a way—yes.”

“Who did the discrediting?”

“They did, themselves. Lucy certainly wasn't compelled to sing but she did; and Mrs. Greene made herself look foolish over that coffee.”

“She did nothing of the kind,” my cousin said. “Stella did it by making Lucy Pauls do it. When Mrs. Greene was here three months ago George Crozier showed his interest in her; he went to see her when he was in New York a little later, and he talked about her

when he came home; Stella decided the woman was getting dangerous."

"Why dangerous? Why shouldn't Crozier marry again if he wants to?"

"He should, but that little white-faced brute of his will never let him," Mary said; and her bitterness was that of a looker-on, not on her own account. She had no desire to marry Crozier, or anybody, as I well knew. "Stella Crozier is a little brute," she went on. "Stella is the heart's essence of green. Only over her dead body will one penny of her father's fortune ever get into anybody else's hands; and while she lives George Crozier's not going to be allowed to marry again. Every eligible widow and all the spinsters, except me, in this town have had hopes of him I think; but Stella's beaten them all. She discredits them with him one after the other, and, when she can, she uses Lucy Pauls to do it. Lucy is just so much furniture around the house to Crozier; she's always been there and is a sort of Stella's shadow—a nothing. So, when even this nothing, this shadow, this chair of a girl, does something well that another woman does ill, the other woman looks like thirty cents. And Stella's never used Lucy better than she did tonight."

"I'm afraid you'll have to be more definite," I said. "How and when did Stella—"

"Didn't she fairly leap to it when poor Mrs. Greene gave her the chance she'd been waiting for and made a mess indeed of Crozier's coffee? Stella showed her father that even furniture could do it better! Lucy did her sly little part well, the poor slave! Did you miss her mockery of Mrs. Greene—about the 'lovely bubbling'?"

"You think Lucy said that deliberately instead of irresistibly?"

"She said it obediently," Mary answered. "She had to do it because she knew what Stella wanted, and Stella's got her into the habit of complete subjection. Well, what did Mrs. Greene do to meet that attack on her? The woman knew she'd been attacked by the two cousins; I suppose you admit that now, don't you?"

"I thought she took it very well."

"She did more than take it well. She put on her big show. You may not have realized how superbly she sang, but nobody needed to be musical to see how stunning she looked at the piano. She knew it, of course, just as well as she knew a man like Crozier might very well decide that such a fine duchessy showpiece was just the thing he needs to complete his big showy house and his showy, lonely life. Stella knocked the show to flinders. She made

Lucy sing right afterward and utterly spoiled Mrs. Greene."

"What! It was Lucy who was spoiled."

"No," Mary said. "Not with everyone. You didn't look carefully at George Crozier. He was impressed by Mrs. Greene's music; but Stella knows that he's like most businessmen about such things. What he really likes is 'Sweet Genevieve,' and he hates anything he doesn't understand. Mrs. Greene had made him almost forget that, but Stella reminded him. 'In the Gloaming' in a little child's voice like Lucy's is his real style. Stella threw it at Mrs. Greene tonight and finished her. Poor Lucy! She was tragic."

"She was at least pitiful," I said.

"She was tragic, I tell you! What she did involved a sacrifice. I told you that you'd seen a struggle of three women over a man—we've just been talking about that—and another struggle of two women for another man. It's one of the most atrocious things I ever knew!"

She spoke with a wrathfulness that at least was proof of her conviction; and in a meek voice I asked her to be more explicit. "I'll try to see it if you show me."

"I think Stella Crozier ought to be hanged," she said. "Lucy and Atwill Daily sat directly across from you at the table. Of course, you're used to thinking of Lucy as background—out of it so far as men are concerned—but if you'd been a stranger and had watched that couple opposite you, you'd have thought they were lovers. Wouldn't you?"

"I suppose I should."

"You'd have been right," Mary said. "That's exactly what they were. Atwill Daily has been seeking Lucy out lately as much as he possibly could. It's been her first chance to marry and she wanted to take it, poor thing! Background furniture mightn't get another chance—ever. Stella ruined it all tonight. Atwill is musical—at least he thinks he is—and 'In the Gloaming' finished Lucy for him. Did you see his face when she was at the piano?"

But at this I protested. "You do run away with yourself! You've just been telling me that Stella made Lucy sing in order to upset Mrs. Greene with Crozier, and now you—"

"I do indeed," Mary insisted with emphasis. "That pallid little brute must have come as near happiness over it as she could ever come over anything. She did two vicious things at one stroke."

"But why should she spoil Lucy? She certainly isn't wantonly destructive."

"Listen," Mary said. "Stella's never cared anything at all about the man she's engaged to. She took him because almost all the other girls' mothers wanted him; but she's had that mild pleasure and it's palled. Suddenly it appears that her unregarded hand-maiden has the most interesting looking cavalier in town as a prospective suitor."

"Atwill Daily! Why, he isn't interesting looking. He isn't even—"

"Women think so," Mary said with superiority. "In regard to the appearance and charm of men, women have a different eye—you'll save time by thinking of that simply as an inexplicable fact. To us Atwill Daily is the most interesting looking man in town; we don't care whether or not he's the handsomest. What's more, he doesn't shine in a general conversation, but when he becomes personal with a lady he's quite another matter; naturally, you couldn't know anything about that. Well, what does Stella Crozier do when she suddenly discovers that he's in a fair way to be owned by her slave? I can't tell you what she feels, because some recesses of that niggardly little bosom are secrets to me; but I can tell you what she's decided to do. She's decided to take away this one desirable possession of her cousin's and own it herself."

"But there's Garvey; Stella's engaged to him."

"He's the sixth I was talking about," Mary said. "I mean his was the sixth life that came to a crisis tonight. Stella will toss him back to the girls' mothers."

At this I ventured to laugh again. "And for Atwill Daily! You say she's avaricious, and yet she's going to throw away a pearl for a paste diamond. Garvey's worth a thousand of Atwill."

"But Atwill has one overwhelming value: He belongs to another girl. What's absolutely unbearable to Stella is that the other girl is the wearer of her old dresses."

"Perhaps I could come nearer understanding that than I could another mystery in your drama," I said. "Lucy certainly knew, herself, what an exhibition her singing made of her; she showed how miserably she knew it. Then why did she let Stella make her sing? Answer that and I'll believe your whole preposterous theory."

Mary frowned. "Lucy struggled, but she had to give in. It was in line with her job of discrediting Mrs. Greene, and she has the long habit of doing for Stella. She and Stella weren't eight years old when Stella began being the 'rich little girl' and Lucy the 'poor relation.' Stella's put that over her all her life and she put it over her tonight as she always has. Don't you see?"

"No." I got up to go. "Not if Lucy cares for Atwill Daily or wants to marry him. Force of habit wouldn't make her lose the most important thing in her life. Lucy's too intelligent. She may be Stella's slave, but she's never been Stella's fool. And on that one point your whole structure collapses, Mary."

"It doesn't," she said sharply, rising to face me. "I'm speaking of facts; I'm not building a structure. I'm absolutely right about the whole thing, and you'll soon see that I am."

"How soon?"

"Within three months."

"Very well. If I don't see you proved right within three months—"

"Two!" she said. "Within two months even you will know that I speak the truth of Stella Crozier. Two!"

We didn't have to wait that long. Mrs. Strumer Greene, vanishing upon the third day after her performance at the Croziers', left behind her the rumor of a Sicilian destination; and, that the dispersal of the dinner party might not lack in spaciousness, another member of it was shortly afterward announced as intended for the Argentine. Young Garvey was to establish a Garvey Refrigerator branch in Buenos Aires; would remain there in charge for a year—or more, if necessary—and he was to sail accompanied by experts but not by a bride. Stella had balked at South America; her father needed her and she could not leave him; she would faithfully await her lover's return.

Two weeks after he sailed she was quietly married to Atwill Daily in the new cathedral, which must have looked grandly unpeopled, since the only witnesses were a best friend of the groom, the bride's father, Lucy, and Mary Buell. What Mary really represented as a witness was General Publicity, I think, though ostensibly she was there in her character of next-door neighbor; and when I heard of the event I was ready to admit that she had astonished me. I kept away from her, however, because when she is freshly in triumph she is sometimes less charming than I like to find her, and a readiness to admit astonishment does not mean that one is ready to be trampled upon.

When I did go again to her house it was on a wintry afternoon several weeks later, and as I reached her gate I caught a glimpse of two of the six figures involved in the undoubted crises of the dinner I had failed to read.

A heavy closed car rolled out of Crozier's driveway and turned

townward upon the thoroughfare. Traveling bags were visible in front with the chauffeur; Crozier, in brown tweeds, sat within the glossy enclosure, and beside him, Lucy Pauls, apparently taking dictation from him as they drove.

"Taking more than dictation," I thought, deducing that Lucy was taking her cousin's place in Stella's absence, on guard for Stella against all widows and spinsters, and adding a little secretarial work to boot. Evidently the honeymooners had not returned, or Stella would have been going to the station with her father, as she always did.

Here I was wrong, for I found her in Mary Buell's living room. Moreover, I found her there in tears, and almost, though not quite, upon Mary's shoulder. Even before I turned to retire I had time for some flickerings of thought upon this singularity. Mary so loved her own interpreting that she would have offered solace to Judas himself in order to get something out of him to interpret. This I knew; but why do troubled ladies so often bring their tragic confidences to recognized gossipers? Is it because that there they are surest of the tokens of sympathy, or is it because what they really want, sometimes, is to get their confidences made known?

The question was in my mind as I mumbled something and went back to the door I had too hastily entered; but Stella's sobbing became instantly turbulent. "No, no!" she said, and made detaining gestures. "You're a neighbor, too. Don't go. I want you to know. Wait a minute."

She meant that she needed a minute to compose herself, and she spent it with a sudden little handkerchief upon her eyes and nose. Mary sat silent, looking at her, though she spared me a queer side glance that puzzled me. Mary was excited, of course; but what I could not understand was the lack of even a surreptitious triumph in this quick half look at me. There was bafflement in it, as if some of her reading had been mistaken or her predicting had gone wrong, perhaps. I hoped so.

Stella asked me, in a watery voice, "You haven't heard what's just happened?"

"No. I didn't even know you'd come home."

"Home!" she sobbed. "To think I'd ever come home like this! It isn't home any more. I thought it was—I always thought it was my home until I got Papa's telegram, yesterday morning." She turned to Mary. "I started back twenty minutes after I got the telegram. I left my trunks—everything. Atwill was out on the hotel

golf links. Of course, he would be! I left a note and the telegram for him; I suppose he'll get here sometime today. He wouldn't have been any use, though."

Thus she spoke of her bridegroom, and her tone was that of a woman married for years and long accustomed to her husband's inadequacy. "He wouldn't have known how to help me. It does seem too awful!"

"You shouldn't think of it like that," Mary said. "You're not looking at it sensibly, Stella."

"I'm not?" Stella cried, and she rose from her chair, clenching the small wet handkerchief tightly in both hands. "I've had my father taken away from me—I've had my very home taken away from me—I've had everything I care for in this disgusting world taken away from me—and you tell me it isn't awful! Maybe you'll tell me she isn't awful?"

"She isn't that," Mary said, and in her voice I caught a note of wondering admiration. "She's certainly shown herself much more adroit and calculating than anybody would have dreamed she was; and yet, after all, she only—"

"She only!" Stella echoed, in fiercest mockery. "Only! She's only plotted and planned and sneaked and tricked and played false to every human decency for years and years; that's all she's 'only' done! You were at that dinner we gave to Mrs. Greene—you both were—and you saw what the little snake did. Poor Mrs. Greene! I'd a thousand times rather have had her. I'd give anything in the world if I could undo what was done that night. What that little snake did to Mrs. Greene is what she's done to other nice women that liked Papa before; and all the time I thought she was only helping me to guard him! And I—blind! Blind and trusting all this time! When I got his telegram I saw the whole hideous thing—I'd never dreamed it. I had hysterics four times on the train. Who wouldn't?"

"What for?" I said.

She almost screamed. "What for? I'll never speak to him again! I hate him! Oh, how I hate him for his spinelessness! I hate him for that almost as much as I hate her treachery. All the time she was just playing with me; she made me think she liked Atwill. She did! She pretended to be excited over him so that I'd never suspect what she was excited over. I absolutely believed she wanted Atwill. I told Papa she'd done that; I told him so before her the instant I got to the house this noon. Do you think it did any good? Did it

stop him? He had the minister in the library and just took her in there with him and locked the door and left me outside. I've taken care of him and nursed him and watched over him every minute of my life since my mother died, and that's what he did to me! Locked me out of the room while he was doing that ghastly, treacherous, wicked thing!"

"What wicked thing?" I asked. "What is it your father's done, Stella?"

Her voice became an outright shriek. "What's he done? He's married Lucy Pauls! Two hours ago, while I beat and beat and beat on the door till my knuckles bled, and they wouldn't let me in!"

"What?"

"See!" she cried. "Look! Look what I did to stop them!"

Then, sobbing, she stretched forth her little hands and showed me the marks upon them. I beheld the signs that had been lacking to me before. In those tiny wounds upon helpless hands that had beaten a closed door I beheld and comprehended the whole life of Stella Crozier.

SOLUTION TO THE FEBRUARY "UNSOLVED":

The jeweler divided the nine pearls into three groups of three each. He then weighed three against three. If they just balanced the light pearl was not amongst them and must be in the remaining three. If they did not balance the light pearl was among the lighter three. In either case he knows that the light pearl is among three instead of nine. He now weighs two of the remaining three. If the scales balance the one left over is the fake pearl; if they do not balance, he can locate the lighter pearl on the scales.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon

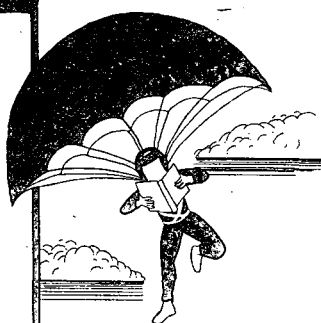


Illustration by Sheila Smith

The big news for P.D. James fans probably isn't the second novel's being filmed for PBS's *Mystery!* series. The big news is *A Taste for Death*, the new novel out this fall (Knopf, \$18.95, 459 pp.), the author's biggest and probably her best as well. After an absence of nine years Adam Dalgliesh is back; this time he's the recently appointed head of a special investigative squad. Their first case is a double homicide, a bloody affair that has taken place in a homely vestry in a poor London church. One of the dead men is Paul Berowne, a recently resigned Member of the Crown, a wealthy and handsome man whom Dalgliesh had once worked with. As Commander Dalgliesh and his two younger colleagues investigate, they are plunged into a probe that will cast light on many secrets; a light that will illuminate some characters and blind others; a light that reveals deceit and disloyalty, loss of faith and corruption of innocence, betrayal of love and political beliefs, of moral compunctions and long-standing religious conviction. This is a novel rich in character, detail, theme, tied together with a string of suspense, and beribboned with a harrowing ending. *A Taste for Death* poses many questions for the reader as well as for its protagonist, and James, wisely, doesn't attempt to answer all of them in these pages. *A Taste for Death* was worth the waiting, and has whetted my appetite for more of Commander Dalgliesh by P.D. James.

Author Edward Gorman's twenty years in the advertising business have obviously helped authenticate the atmosphere he por-

trays in **Rough Cut** (Ballantine Books, \$2.95, 151 pp.), a prettily paced murder mystery set in the plush halls of the small Chicago ad agency of Harris-Ketchum. Narrator Michael Ketchum is a sympathetic protagonist, a harried executive saddled with a contentious partner, a thoroughly exasperating client, and an empty personal life. The withdrawal of Ketchum's partner from the agency might seem a boon—but not when one considers that Harris's retirement is a direct result of fatal stab wounds in his back. This mystery surely won't persuade anyone to pursue an advertising career, but its background is an appealing one for a tale of contemporary murder, blackmail, and even romance.

Barbara Paul has cast a legendary tenor in the role of detective in the entertaining **A Cadenza for Caruso** (Signet, \$2.95, 172 pp.). The year is 1910, and the occasion—aside from the murderous doings yet to come—is the rehearsal and upcoming debut of Puccini's latest opera, *The Girl of the Golden West*. The composer, recuperating from a recent personal scandal back home in Italy, is befriended by the ebullient Caruso, who makes a wonderfully generous and curious detective. Together with Toscanini, who is conducting the new work, and David Belasco, who has taken on the job of stage direction, Caruso and Puccini are enjoying the adulation of New York opera buffs and the grandeur of the Met. And when the offstage doings begin to vie with the onstage action for sheer melodrama, Caruso decides to look into the matter himself. This is just plain fun.

Another mystery with an historical background is Max Allan Collins's delightful **True Detective** (Tor Books, \$3.95, 373 pp.). Collins offers a generous helping of history and a satisfyingly lengthy tale in this book, which stars Nate Heller, an honest ex-cop trying to stay alive in a town that doesn't put much value on honesty. Nate's friends (and enemies) should give you a clue to the time and place: Eliot Ness, Al Capone, Walter Winchell, George Raft, Frank Nitti, Mayor Cermak. That's correct: Nate Heller's beat is Chicago in the last days of Prohibition. Nate is a memorable character in his own right, a spunky no-nonsense guy with a strong sense of loyalty, a quick mind, and a wry narrative voice. The plot, chock-full of authentic period details and events, defies a short description. Collins has actually written a period novel with a detective as the protagonist, and anyone even slightly familiar with Chicago should find *True Detective* a real treat.

L.B. Greenwood has written an authorized Holmes-Watson pastiche that is certainly worth the consideration of any fan.

Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Raleigh Legacy (Athenaeum, \$12.95, 171 pp.) purports to be a heretofore unpublished Watsonian version of one of the duo's early cases, and it has a lot of the elements one expects. There's a worthy young man and his beloved wife—but is she as innocent as she appears? There's the young penniless heir's stepfather, whom we don't like but we can't actually say *why*. There's a mysterious and—for a long time—too cryptic letter as a clue, one that goes nicely with the isolated ruins of the family manse, the murdered family retainer, and the ancient belief in a family treasure of incalculable value. Hop aboard a departing train from Victoria Station just once more with your old friends Holmes and Watson, and take one giant step back into time. Greenwood has managed to capture much of the flavor and milieu of the original stories in this latest addition to the legend.

There's something attractive about the site of a college campus for murder. Perhaps it's the almost cloistered feel of the place, so familiar and at the same time so potentially threatening. Or maybe it's just that an academic milieu promises readers a quirky and clever assortment of characters bundled together in close quarters, folks whose dialogue will be erudite or amusing even when it's not exactly enlightening on the subject of whodunit. At any rate, Susan Kenney's **Graves in Academe** (Penguin Books, \$3.50, 274 pp.) promised much by its mere title, and it delivered. Roz Howard, English teacher, agrees to fill in on short notice as professor at the small college of Canterbury in the town of Southwark, Maine. She is replacing a colleague dead in a freak accident—or was it just an accident? More violence and bizarre events occur, each confirming Roz's fantastic theory: someone is following her course syllabus carefully, and seems to be taking its lessons a bit too seriously. This tale is filled with imaginative mayhem, winning characters, hidden motives, and the usual romance.

From a High Place marked the debut of Edward Mathis's Texas detective, Dan Roman. Roman makes his latest appearance in a new novel, **Dark Streaks and Empty Places** (Scribner's, \$13.95, 247 pp.), and it should attract the same kind of critical praise that his first novel did. Private eye Dan Roman is hired by a sick and reclusive Texas millionaire to locate his missing granddaughter Sandy, who also happens to be the CEO for the family-held corporation. As Roman investigates, he learns much about the young woman: her husband is only mildly interested in his wife's whereabouts, while Sandy's twin sisters seem almost overeager to know what Roman has discovered. Sandy's eccentric relatives include

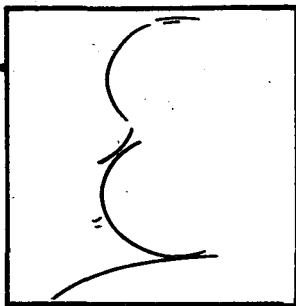
another recluse, an aging, macho uncle with a beautiful wife; they apparently were the last people to see her alive. Or is she still alive? This is sophisticated reading, with psychologically mature characters, grownup motives, and a peek into the Texas of today. It's an exceptionally good contemporary private eye tale, with fine writing and plotting instead of gratuitous violence and sleaze. Mathis fans should be pleased with *Dark Streaks*, and their numbers will undoubtedly grow with its publication.

Murder on Martha's Vineyard by Kelley Roos (Walker Quality Mystery, \$2.95, 197 pp.) should appeal to fans of the "Gothic" genre. Nancy Webster surprises herself by moving back to picturesque Martha's Vineyard, the site of idyllic childhood summers—and a terrifying tragedy involving her first marriage. But it's years later, and Nancy has remarried a local man; what could be more natural than Martha's Vineyard as their new home? And who would ever suspect that lightning would strike twice in the very same spot? There's suspense and a spunky heroine here, if this is your cup of tea.

For something different, join the famous West African detective Dr. Quarshie in **The Killer Breath**, Academy Mystery's reprint of one of John Wyllie's mysteries (\$4.95, 189 pp.). The title refers to a term for demonic evil, and hints at the difficulty the reasonable and intelligent Dr. Quarshie will encounter in this case of a missing daughter. The language here is almost as exotic (and, I suspect, authentic) as the numerous other details about West Africa and its denizens, and it goes a long way toward making up for a plot that very slowly gets off the ground. One doesn't read Dr. Quarshie for fast-paced action, but for the fascinating peek into such a richly drawn culture.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



In *52 Pick-Up*, factory owner Harry Mitchell of Los Angeles, played by Roy Scheider, learns that he has been enmeshed in a carefully woven web of blackmail. His situation is that of the ordinary guy, like Jimmy Stewart in Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, who is suddenly thrust into a criminal situation that he will have to get out of without the aid of the police. Today, the ordinary guy in the movies is a lot slicker than was Stewart back in 1956. Scheider runs a high-tech steel manufacturing plant, dresses well, keeps in shape by doing laps in his private pool, drives a nifty Jaguar sports car, and is having an affair with a twenty-two-year-old beauty.

In the 1973 Elmore Leonard novel that the movie is based on, the Scheider character is a bit closer to the Stewart mid-

western type. He owns an auto parts manufacturing plant in Detroit and talks a bit less grammatically and, one imagines, a bit louder than Roy Scheider's version. But in the book and movie alike, one step off the straight and narrow—a man's first, brief affair—catapults him into an underworld, seamy-sided situation such as most people imagine only in their nightmares.

In this kind of thriller the hero can't be made to do anything exceptionally brilliant or heroic. He has to just keep plugging away, sometimes making mistakes, until he finds out who his tormentors are and can figure out a way of dealing with them. That's how it works in *52 Pick-Up*. The blackmailers want one hundred and five thousand dollars to keep quiet about Scheider's affair. He can't let them go public with

the evidence lest he ruin his wife's chances of being elected councilwoman. His only move is to start asking questions back at the joint where he met the girl. The trail, not surprisingly, leads through the sleazier parts of Los Angeles. The point, of course, is to take an unexceptional, middle-aged couple on a dark voyage. In Hollywood terms this translates into lots of sex and nudity, though for once a bit less than the full measure of violence and blood.

In the movie, the wife is little more than a victim. This means that actress Ann-Margret has been given a disappointingly morose, inactive role to play. Scheider's frantic

concern when she is kidnapped by one of the blackmailers has to be taken on faith. His plan to save her, similarly, proves to be of more technical than human interest.

The plan comes down to turning the members of the blackmailing trio against one another, then convincing the last of them to take about half of what was asked for: exactly fifty-two thousand. One gets the idea from the title that the last blackmailer has to be left figuratively picking up all the cards in the deck, but Scheider's exact *modus operandi* isn't revealed until the end. By this time he knows that he is dealing with perverts and murderers—they have executed the girl—who undoubtedly plan to kill him and his wife once the money has been delivered.

Scheider carries off the tricky delivery of the money with a good deal more self-possession than the character in the book. But he never quite departs from being pretty much an ordinary Joe who has used his technical know-how, together with a streak of bravery he probably didn't know he possessed, to bring his life back to normal. It's a pleasant surprise for an up-to-date movie to end in this way—with a virtual endorsement of fidelity, middle-aged marriage, and normality.



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Roy Scheider in *52 Pick-Up*.

THE STORY THAT WON



Photo by Arthur Tress

The November Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Richard Ciciarelli of Phelps, New York. Honorable mentions go to Wanda Blank Freynick of Alexandria, Virginia; Carol Ottolenghi-Barga of Worthington, Ohio; Frank Peirce of College Station, Texas; Gail M. Upton of Rochester, Minnesota; Sally Ann Olley of St. Marys, West Virginia; Doris M. Burr of Hollywood, Florida; Neil Scanlan of Richardson, Texas; Lynne C. Wilsey of San Francisco, California; I. Bernard of New York, New York; Mark Truman of Midway City, California; Kim Gausepohl of Andover, New Jersey; and Karen Becker of Great Neck, New York.

SHADES OF THE MASTER by Richard Ciciarelli

The note had arrived at our flat at 221B Baker Street earlier that day.

"Be at the third pillar from the left outside the Lyceum Theatre tonight at 7:00," it read.

Now, at five minutes of seven, my roommate and I approached our designated rendezvous, his eyes gleaming more and more the closer we got to it.

"My dear Whatsit," he said, "I think our second case is coming to a head. Perhaps you can chronicle it as you did our first, the one involving that American Southern belle who was found murdered in her den. What did you call it again?"

"A Scarlet in the Study," I replied. "But surely, Homes, you don't think that note will actually conclude the complex, baffling adventure we've been involved in?"

"Yes, Whatsit, I feel it will. When Mary Morstain came to us with her interesting problem of the yearly gifts of pearls from a mysterious donor, who'd have thought it would have led us to murder, deceit, and the long-missing Agra treasure?"

And Homes was right, as usual. Removing his pipe from between his teeth, the great detective gestured with it toward the pillar.

"There, Whatsit," he remarked, "stands the entire solution to this case."

"Homes!" I shouted. "You don't mean . . ."

"Exactly, Whatsit: the Four of the Signs."

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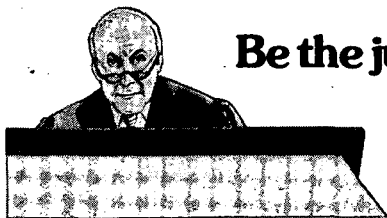
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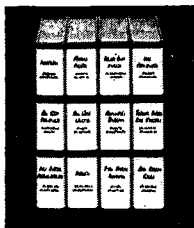
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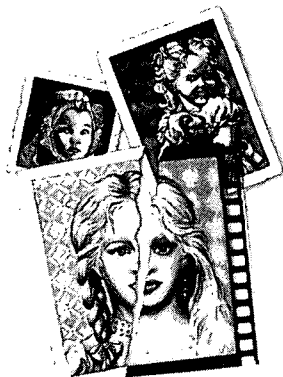
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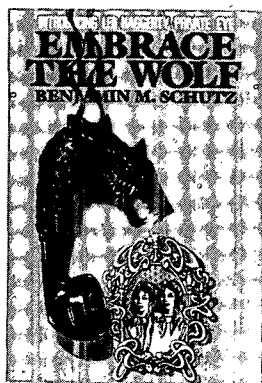
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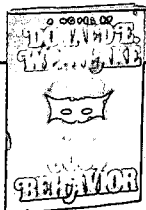
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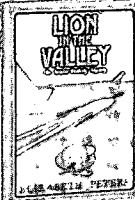
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